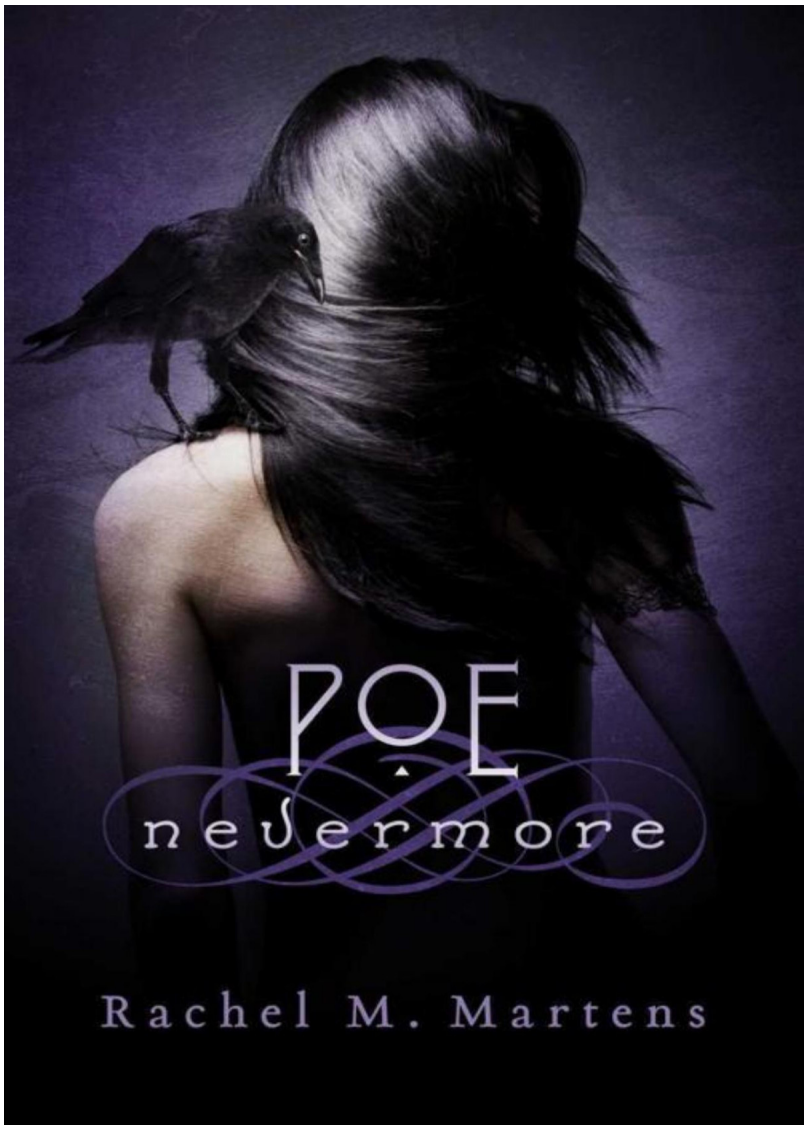
Poe: Nevermore Rachel Martens pdf download

https://ebookmass.com/product/poe-nevermore-rachel-martens/



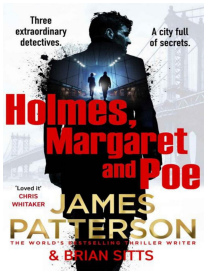
Explore and download more ebooks at ebookmass.com

Here are some recommended products for you. Click the link to download, or explore more at ebookmass.com

Global Pathways to Education Kerstin Martens

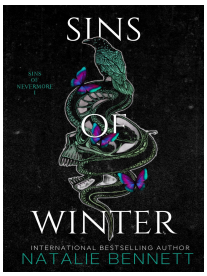
https://ebookmass.com/product/global-pathways-to-education-kerstin-martens/

Holmes, Margaret and Poe James Patterson



https://ebookmass.com/product/holmes-margaret-and-poe-james-patterson/

Sins of Winter (Sins of Nevermore Book 1) Natalie Bennett



https://ebookmass.com/product/sins-of-winter-sins-of-nevermore-book-1-natalie-bennett/

Data Science Ethics: Concepts, Techniques, and Cautionary Tales David Martens

https://ebookmass.com/product/data-science-ethics-concepts-techniques-and-cautionary-tales-david-martens/

The Nature of Witches Rachel Griffin

https://ebookmass.com/product/the-nature-of-witches-rachel-griffin-3/

Wild is the Witch Rachel Griffin

https://ebookmass.com/product/wild-is-the-witch-rachel-griffin-2/

Wild is the Witch Rachel Griffin

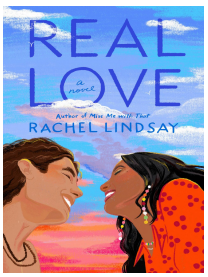
https://ebookmass.com/product/wild-is-the-witch-rachel-griffin/

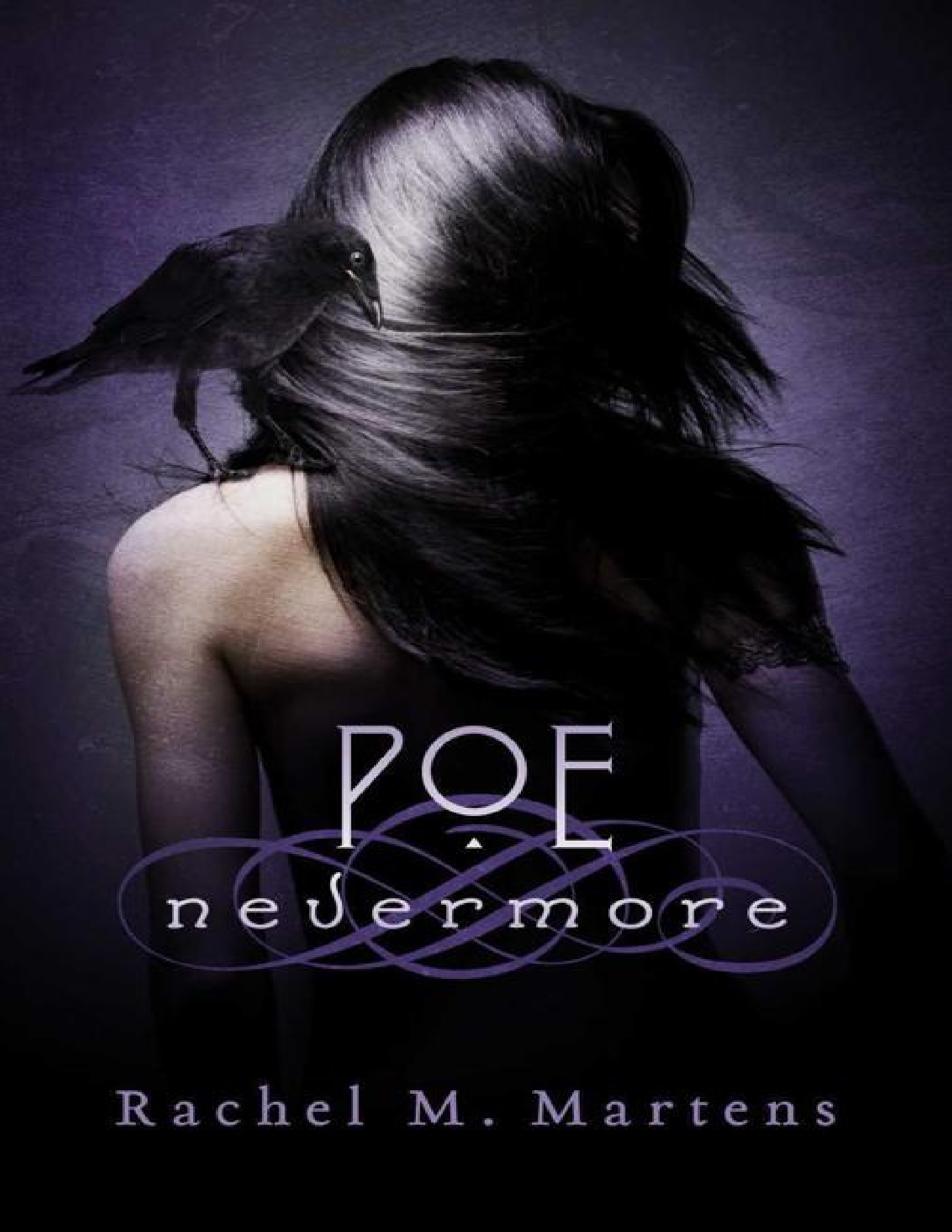
The Nature of Witches Rachel Griffin

https://ebookmass.com/product/the-nature-of-witches-rachel-griffin-2/

Real Love: A Novel Rachel Lindsay

https://ebookmass.com/product/real-love-a-novel-rachel-lindsay/




POE
nevermore
Rachel M. Martens

POE: NEVERMORE

Rachel M. Martens

Haunted Forest Publishing

Copyright © 2015 Rachel M. Martens

All rights reserved.

First Edition: June 2013
Second Edition: March 2015

ISBN-13: 9781483531403

Cover design by: Robin Ludwig Design, Inc.
www.gobookcoverdesign.com

Printed in the United States of America

‘Prophet!’ said I, ‘thing of evil-prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us-by that God we both adore-
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore-
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore’
Quoth the Raven, ‘Nevermore.’
‘Be that word our sign in parting, bird or fiend,’ I shrieked, upstarting-
‘Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!-quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!’
Quoth the Raven, ‘Nevermore.’

“The Raven”- Edgar Allan Poe

PART ONE

"...Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow;- vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow..."

ONE

Everything is bathed in red light, as if blood spattered over the light fixtures and its color is now being cast about the room in horrific brilliance. The tips of my fingers skim along the blood-soaked walls, leaving thin white lines of cleanliness beneath which someone's life drips. My shoes pick up red stain with each step I take on the swamp-like plush carpet, each of those steps accompanied by a nauseating squishing sound. A door waits at the end of the hallway, hanging ajar by a mere inch, just enough to reveal the darkness in the room beyond.

My pulse quickens and I can feel my ribcage expanding and contracting with each breath, can hear my heart beating louder, louder with every step towards that door….

The stench of blood thick in the air begins to twist my stomach and make me gag. The pounding of my heart in my head is inducing a migraine and with each thump *of the muscle, my eyes shiver and the entire hallway seems to vibrate. Or, perhaps, the vibrations of the hallway are not a result of the migraine, but of my heart pounding with such force that the sound emanating from within my chest is so loud as to shake the entire house. My skull feels as though it has been caught within a slowly tightening vice, crushing me in its iron jaws, sending warm blood trickling from my ears.*

I reach the door and slowly extend my hand before me, the pain in my head growing exponentially as I close the distance. I press my palm flush against the blood-spattered pane. I can hear a creaking sound exploding in my ears, and I'm screaming as my skull begins to crack under the pressure. With one last step forward, I push the door open…

The world falls away beneath my feet, my stomach, my heart, my breath in my throat, water in my legs. And I'm falling, falling, falling, falling….

A scream jolted me awake and I sprang upright in my bed, eyes wide as saucers as they darted around. Just as the automatic reaction to find the source of the scream and offer help took hold, I realized the screamer was me.

My shoulders slumped and I put one hand to my temple to hold up my head while I tried to slow my racing pulse and concentrate on the room around me, on reality. *Relax, Poe. That wasn't real.*

Of course the nightmare wasn't real, they never were, but its source was all too alive in my memory and that was what always made the nightmares difficult to recover from. It wasn't sleep deprivation or graphic images that were the real Death's Heads that haunted me. It was the emotional wounds that never really heal, the scars that can so easily be torn open again by a masochistic subconscious.

I took another deep, slow breath and then, with the nightmare sufficiently dispelled that my hands were no longer shaking, took my hand from my head and turned on the lamp on my bedside table. As the tiny, dingy apartment bedroom was flooded with light, I grasped the water glass I had left near the lamp and took a cautious sip. Slowly, I returned the half-empty glass to its place and adjusted the pillows so that I could lean back on them against the black rummage sale headboard with hand-painted silver scrollwork. The room was very small, so the poor lighting given off by the solitary lamp was enough to throw nearly the entire space into relief, soaked up only in the thick black curtains hiding the lights of Baltimore from my view. The bed was a full-size mattress as thin as a pillow, acquired at the same rummage sale as the headboard, with three thick quilts on it to defend against the apartment's nonexistent heating system. The bed took up the vast majority of the floorspace, but I'd managed to wedge a large dresser with a tiny mirror balanced on it against the opposing wall. Nearly a dozen cleverly placed paintings and drawings I'd done over the years hid water stains and peeling plaster on the walls. The cost of living in Baltimore wasn't obscene by any means, but being only two years out of college with no family or inheritance to help me get by meant I was extremely lucky to afford even an apartment this lousy. Battered paperbacks and water-damaged hardcovers filled rickety bookshelves along the walls and continued out into the living area. Just looking at the hundreds of books surrounding me, no matter their condition, was enough to chase away the nightmare.

I turned back towards the bedside table and checked the display on my stone-age alarm clock. Sure enough, it was five o'clock. The damn thing hadn't gone off.

Throwing off the quilts, I shivered and slipped out of bed, wincing when my feet connected with the cold hardwood floor. Quickly, I flung open the closet and retrieved a black turtleneck, jeans and sneakers, then proceeded to the dresser for a bra, panties, and socks. The bathroom had looked like something straight out of parasite-heaven when I'd first started renting here, but I had since scrubbed it and smothered every surface in bleach enough times that it no longer made me nauseous to shower in there. I showered quickly and dressed, then blow-dried my long, thick, dark brown hair, a task which took me no less than ten minutes even when I left it mostly damp. I rushed to apply enough cover-up to conceal the triple-bags under my eyes, the scars of an insomniac. In the kitchen, I retrieved an apple from the refrigerator and grabbed my jean jacket and some cash, then exited the apartment at a run.

The trouble with working at Starbucks is that you often have to work in the early hours of the day. It is a good job for someone who doesn't sleep much, though; I was awake every morning by five anyway.

My apartment was only about five blocks from the Starbucks location where I worked, so I liked to run there every morning for my shift. Living in downtown Baltimore meant that during most of the day, the sidewalks were fairly crowded and

not a great environment for running, but in the early hours of the morning like this, there were only a spare few people around. The sky was thick with dark grey clouds, though it was nearly six o'clock, and a fresh dusting of snow covered the sidewalk, disturbed only in thin tracks left by joggers and dog-walkers. Few other people were dedicated or crazy enough to be out on the streets so early in late November.

I pumped my legs and broke into a sprint, my sneakers pounding on the cold-hardened cement. It was not an easy task, but I managed to stay upright despite the wet snow and slush. My heart beat faster, my lungs pumped harder, and I felt a smile ever-so-slowly stretching across my face as the freeness of the icy air and the city flying by me swept the night's terrors away.

Starbucks was quiet when I arrived; only two joggers and one man with a laptop were seated at the tables. There was one employee at the counter, a high school drop-out named Gavin. Gavin spent his days working at this less than fine establishment and playing World of Warcraft. I knew because on the rare occasion we'd tried to force a conversation, within about two exchanges the subject inevitably shifted to his maniacal obsession with the game. As a result, I tried not to encourage conversation, which wasn't too difficult. Gavin was usually so busy daydreaming or whispering to himself that he barely had a free moment to talk. He did register my arrival, though, and rewarded me with a not-quite-half smile, along with a 'Hey, Poe.'

In the back room, I punched in and hung up my coat, replacing it with my Starbucks uniform, which I hurriedly threw on, along with the silly green hat, apron, and non-slip shoes. I even labeled my punch-cards *Poe*, though that wasn't my first name. I went by my last name on account of an unfortunate choice by my parents: Elenora Allison Poe. I couldn't stand my first or middle name. Besides, being a huge fan of Edgar Allan Poe made borrowing the last name all too desirable.

I headed out to the front counter, tying my apron as I went and rolling my eyes when I spotted the manager bent over his office computer, no doubt watching porn again. I really pitied his wife. He wore a gold band on his left ring-finger despite the fact that I couldn't imagine a woman who would stoop so low as to marry him. Then again, I was not one to judge. Mrs. Aaron had married my foster-father after all. If Jonathan Aaron had once been sane enough to be marriage material, then it wasn't so hard to see that a surly coffee-shop owner with a profound interest in Internet porn could have been as well.

I continued to my post behind the counter, delivering a small smile to Gavin as I relieved him. Without a word, he scampered into the back room to grab his monstrous Star Trek hoodie and deposit his hat and apron. I slipped my apple out of my pocket and hid it away under the counter to save it for the off-chance I would have time to eat it during my shift. Within a minute or so, Gavin was stalking through Starbucks to the front door and, ultimately, the nearest bus stop, his iPod blasting quirky techno music through his earbuds. I had tried more than once to tell him he would be deaf within a few years, but only earned myself a few sneers and dirty looks as payment for the advice.

I did not really mind working at Starbucks. It was not the cushiest job in Baltimore and I was not the full-time writer I dreamed of being yet, but it wasn't bad. The coffee shop generally smelled good and the music the manager selected was soft and relaxing, as opposed to the grocery store music I had endured at other establishments. As a bonus, the pay was a few dollars better than minimum wage, which was more than could be said of most of the other places I had held jobs at since I was fifteen.

As my shift wore on, I found myself falling deeper and deeper into my memories. It was not nostalgia by any stretch of the imagination, though I was not happy with where I was in my life. It was more like a cancer that you can keep cutting out only to have it resurface in another part of your body, the sort that can never really be cured or forgotten. I tried to avoid letting the memories consume me, as they so often tended to do. They slowly ate away at the wall I had carefully constructed to bury them at the back of my mind.

Up until I turned fifteen, I had had the luxury of my bare essential clothing paid for by -my foster parents, who also permitted me to use the spare bedroom upstairs. When I had turned fifteen, though, I had come home from school to find all my possessions that the Aarons had paid for at the curb. The bed frame was broken, the mattress was torn, the sheets and curtains ripped, the nightstand and dresser kicked in. I would never forget the way my stomach had dropped when I had stood in the threshold of my former bedroom, staring into my foster-father's new study as he smiled at me lecherously from behind a huge desk. He was fingering the gaudy ring he always wore with the big engraved 'A' on it, the ring he loved more than anyone else in the world combined. "Happy birthday, Elenora," he'd said slowly, as if he was savoring the words.

My foster-parents from then on refused to contribute to my state of living any more than providing me with one meal a day and allowing me to live in the basement, where I slept on an ancient couch missing its springs until I left for college. I had to find a way to pay for any other comforts myself.

To be honest, I was glad to be in the basement, far away from the bastard.

Hot coffee overflowed the cup I was filling and I snapped out of the depressing reverie, wincing and smashing my palm on the 'stop' button. Carefully, I set the cup down on the counter and wiped the coffee from it and my hands, then brought the cup to the customer, a young blond man in jeans and a heavy leather jacket. He raised his eyebrows, looking down towards the counter, and muttered, "Jeez."

I realized he was looking at my scalded red hands and shrugged, half-smiling grimly, "It's nothing. High tolerance

for pain. I barely even felt it."

I realized it was a bad answer as I said it, accurate as it might be, but he did not give me an odd look, as I had expected him to. Instead, he frowned in unwavering concern and handed me a ten-dollar bill. "If you say so."

I made no response and opened the cash register, depositing the ten and counting out his change for him. When I held out the change and his receipt to him, he touched my hand and met my gaze. I felt my heart skip a beat, not only at the foreign warmth of his hand, but also at his face, which I had not really registered until that moment. One of the side-effects of poor self-esteem was not usually meeting the eyes of others, but this man's eyes were brilliant, a silvery blue that was like ice but simultaneously molten like liquid steel. They were not blue and not silver. They were not merely like water or metal; they were molten ice, something frozen and smoldering all at once. His face was chiseled, his jaw strong, his mouth soft and compassionate, but it was those eyes that held me frozen like the ice swirling in their depths.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

For just a moment, I wondered if he was really asking about my hands or something else. Then I swallowed in disappointment as the steel door I had built in my mind slammed shut, sealing away my emotions as a necessary evil. I nodded and gave him a fake half-smile I knew he did not buy. "I'm fine," I said unemotionally, one step short of coldly.

He frowned deeply and I felt those eyes piercing right through my skin, as if he could see straight into my soul. "Okay. Thank you," he said. After a hesitant moment, he took the receipt, but left me the change, leaving the coffee shop behind. Long after he had gone, the nerve-endings in my hand still felt strange and tingly and I was sure it was not because of the coffee. I had never been touched like that. I had never seen someone look at me with so much concern, as if they actually cared. As if I mattered.

No. No, no, no. I pushed down the bizarre new emotions trying to break the surface, shoving the man with the blue eyes violently from my mind. He was just a random customer I would never see again. Besides, I was probably imagining the way he looked at me and what was meant by it. Why should he feel concern for me, particularly when he knew me as no more than a Starbucks barista?

Even if I was right about the way he looked at me and even if by some strange stroke of…what? Luck? If by luck, if that was really the correct word, I saw him again, it would never develop into anything worthwhile. He would either turn out to be yet another scumbag, or I would be too worried that he was to let him in. I had been broken one too many times.

They say that the hearts of the dead are never silent. They say that they live on, beat on, love on forever. But what of the hearts of the living? What of those ones who have been broken so many times that they would be better off dead? I knew that their hearts fell silent because mine had done just that. I was broken, empty, dead inside…a hollowed out, ravaged shell of the girl I was. There are those among the living who walk about, breathe, speak, eat, drink, sleep…all while dead. I was one of them.

I had been broken one too many times and torn in one too many pieces. My heart beat with the same passion as the common ghost. I felt nothing anymore: not pain, not passion, and certainly not love. My question was not whether the living could go on dead, because I knew they could, but rather whether the person they once were, the shadow of their shattered soul, could ever be resurrected.

I used to hope such a thing would one day be possible for me. That was before I was broken again, and again, and once more again. I also used to wonder if the pain would ever end until one morning I woke to find that it had gone, much like a nightmare disappears in the light of a new day, only to be replaced by a coldness so much worse than grief, a lack of emotion and feeling, a steel door that overrode all my potential for normalcy any time an opportunity to live arose. The number of offers to 'hang out', 'check out a party' or 'study together' in college that I had turned down were evidence of that. Since I was seventeen, I had not allowed a single person to walk into my life and the few almost-friends I had had quickly fell away. I tried to hold on to my foster-mother, Mrs. Aaron, because she was so sweet and had tried to help me, but I could not. I was not the same person anymore.

As Gigi, the girl who would take my shift, entered the coffeehouse, she waved a quiet hello and vanished into the back room. Watching her, I reflected on what I had lost. Not many friends. I had never been good at making friends, especially because my family had died when I was only two years old and ever since I started preschool, other kids made up cruel rumors about me. One of the worst had actually been Gigi's older sister, who was my age and frankly sociopathic, Gigi's foil in many ways. She'd had a large portion of the student body convinced until high school that I had somehow caused the death of my family and that was why I had been the sole survivor of the tragedy. By high school, no one believed that anymore, but the damage had already been done and befriending me was social suicide.

As a result, I had never had friends nor learned the ability to make friends. I never met anyone in college I spoke to regularly and my roommate had avoided me because I had honestly scared her. I did not blame her and did not mind. I had grown used to the silence.

Gigi tapped me on the shoulder, breaking me out of my reverie. She smiled nicely at me, her perfect white teeth, smooth blond hair and bright green eyes positively glowing in her attempt to make nice. She was a sweet girl, trying to earn her way through college despite the fact that her parents were very wealthy. It also seemed she was trying to make friends with

me and fix me. "It's noon, Poe."

I smiled tightly back at the poor girl. She was wasting her time. "Thanks, Gigi." Just as I was heading for the back room, I remembered my apple and returned to fetch it. As I headed to the back room for my coat and to punch out, I caught Gigi out of my peripheral vision looking at me with concern, no doubt guessing that that was all I was eating for lunch.

--<-~*~->--

I am so cold. Always so cold. The cell is like an icebox. The walls are damp, a wet chill hangs in the air, the cell block reeks of unwashed bodies.

I am sweating. Sweating icicles that drip down the center of my back, over my face, along my chest and arms. I'll kill her. I'll kill them all. I'll kill her and I'll kill that bastard and I'll kill the weak stupid bitch he chose over me and I'll kill them all.

When I get out. Only a few days now, the writing was on the wall, their numbers were up. I'll pick them off one by one, just as it should've been years ago. I know exactly how to do it. I planned it perfectly. There are no flaws, no chinks in the armor, nothing. No possibility for failure. If I play my cards right, no one will ever even know I was the dealer. No one knew the last time, or the time before. So much misery, all my beautiful work. And I'll do it again. But this time, it will be final.

They will die. They will die. They will die….

--<-~*~->--

I had a few hours to kill before my shift at the restaurant where I waitressed, so I walked several blocks to the Enoch Pratt Library. I spent hours every day in that library because it was old, it was architecturally beautiful, there was a great collection of books, and, best of all, it was free and I was poor. Usually, I spent my time there at one of the computer terminals, writing. I did not have the money for a computer of my own.

When I passed through the main doors of the library, the head librarian, Carol, smiled brightly and waved to me. "Nice to see you, Poe."

I smiled slightly. "Nice to see you too, Carol. How was your vacation?"

Carol grinned and her eyes turned reminiscing. "Oh, George and I had a wonderful time. You know, Barbados is wonderful this time of year. The beaches were the perfect escape from this dreadful cold weather. I don't think we've had a winter this cold and this early in years."

I shrugged. "I don't mind the cold too much. But with how clumsy I am, that ice is terrible."

"Winter in general is terrible!" Carol insisted, her voice growing humorously impassioned about the issue. "All that ice and slush and whatnot….although," she added after a thought, "My kids will be home from college soon for the holidays, so that will be lovely. It's always so nice to have the family together."

My smile turned tight and it felt as though a stone had settled in my stomach, but I nodded. "Yes. I'm sure that will be wonderful."

With nothing more, I slipped through the library to one of the computer terminals Carol couldn't see from the front desk. I rested my elbows on the desk and placed my head in my hands. I did not cry, the wounds were too old for that, but there was the sick aching in my chest that was always there to remind me of how hard it is to escape from such a massive loss. One parent or sibling would be painful enough to lose, but both parents and both siblings? I did not even have other relatives. My entire family had been wiped out, leaving me with nothing at the age of two. Somehow I could still recall glimpses of them, but I was not sure if that made the loss any less difficult. In fact, it might have made it worse.

I pushed away the painful memories, logging into the computer with my library card and taking a flashdrive from my pocket. I plugged it into one of the USB ports and scrolled through the files, selecting one after some deliberation, and began to work on it. I was not even a page in when someone took a seat in the chair next to me. I stopped typing, my jaw tightening. I knew that every other terminal was open. There was no one at the computers around me when I had sat down and I would have noticed if someone had appeared since then. Why then was this person sitting *right* next to me?

I was just starting to calm myself, telling myself for the thousandth time that I was being paranoid, when a familiar voice asked, "What are you writing?"

As I tried to slow my racing heart, I gradually twisted in my chair to look at the individual seated next to me and froze, my gaze locked by eyes that could only be described as molten ice, if such a thing existed. After a brief moment, I recovered and my own eyes narrowed. "How did you find me here? Are you stalking me?" I accused. "Who are you?"

The blue-eyed man I had met earlier at Starbucks smiled, seeming to take note of my defensiveness and mentally file it, then skirt around it. "Coincidence. I happen to like the library too and saw you sitting here. I recognized you," he said.

"Right," I snapped, shifting my legs around the chair to face him head-on. "I'm not interested, I do not like to be

followed and I am not attractive enough to be worth stalking. You are wasting your time and I am not someone you can mess with. Leave me alone."

He smiled patiently, his eyes smoldering, the corner of his mouth twitching slightly in an attempt to hide a smile. "I just wanted to talk to you again, maybe over a drink? It's not every day you meet someone who's genuinely interesting and you've only reinforced that view since I sat down."

I raised an eyebrow and gave him a sidelong glance. "'Genuinely interesting'? What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that I think you have a depth that most people lack and I like that about you," he answered, his blue eyes shining with humor. "Besides, I think you are attractive enough to be stalk-able."

I gave him a dark look and answered dryly, "Like I said, I'm not interested. Please leave me alone." I turned back to my computer, noticing that his smile tightened as I did so. He did not leave, but faced forward in his chair and cracked open a book I had not noticed in his hand. The cover seemed familiar in my peripheral vision and I chanced a glance in his direction. The title read: *Selected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.*

He noticed my less than stealthy glance and smiled slightly. "Do you read Edgar Allan Poe?"

I shrugged nonchalantly and turned my attention back to my computer screen. Coincidence. "Isn't he some horror writer?"

He chuckled quietly. "He wrote a lot of humorous things too. One I can think of, perhaps you've heard of it, I believe is called *The System of Doctor Fether and Professor Tarr.*"

I gritted my teeth and couldn't help correcting him. "*Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether."*

"I knew you read him," he said with a broad smile. "You seem like the type."

I sighed inwardly, unable to resist a conversation about Edgar Allan Poe. "I wrote my senior thesis on him. He was a genius."

"A man with that depth of emotion, creative ingenuity and sheer brainpower …brilliant. Simply brilliant. Have you heard that he was the first to come up with the idea of the Big Bang Theory?"

A smile stretched across my face, despite my attempts to stop it. I couldn't remember the last time that had been a problem for me. "I never thought I'd meet someone else who knew that about him."

"He also never went by 'Edgar Allan Poe', it was always simply 'Edgar Poe', which incidentally brings us to the subject of names. I'm Frost."

I raised an eyebrow and turned to face him again, shaking the hand he offered me. His hand was as warm and soft as I'd remembered it from this morning and sent the same weird warmth through my veins. "Poe. Do you have a first name, Frost?"

"I never go by it. Just Frost. Do you have a first name, Poe? And is the name coincidence?" he asked with a grin.

I answered with a much smaller smile. "I never go by my first name either. And 'Poe' is my real name, though of course I'm quite sure it's not from blood relation. I don't have connections to any of his cousins and obviously I'm not a direct descendant."

Frost nodded, his eyes sort of mysterious, as if he was filing away every word I said for future study. He released my hand and looked to my computer. "So, what are you writing?"

"Um…" I hesitated, self-conscious. "Well, I suppose right now I'm working on a novel."

His eyebrows shot up and he chuckled in surprise. "You're kidding."

"No. Aside from being a Starbucks barista, I'm an aspiring writer."

Frost smiled and met my gaze again. "That's incredible," he said honestly. "I wish I could write. I bet it's nice to fall into some other world. Something completely under your control."

I frowned slightly, intrigued by the insight. "Yes," I said quietly. "Yes, I suppose it is."

Frost's eyes had glazed slightly, as if his mind was drifting somewhere else, perhaps somewhere less pleasant. With a blink of the eye, he shook it off and smiled crookedly. "So, about that drink?"

I sighed and shook my head, bad memories of my own racing through my mind. "I don't drink, actually. Thank you for the offer, though."

"Neither do I. I suggested it because a drink is far less pressure than dinner."

I swallowed hard and looked to him sadly. "I'm working tonight. Sorry."

"When are you not working?" he asked with a mischievous glint in his icy eyes. "I suspect you don't say 'yes' often, but you're far too interesting for me to give up on easily."

I smiled tightly and saved my writing, then logged off the computer. "I can't. I work five nights a week and any free time I have I need to be writing. Otherwise I'll never publish anything and I'll be stuck at Starbucks forever." I stood and pushed in my chair, awkwardly avoiding his piercing gaze as I said, "I enjoyed talking to you, Frost. It was nice to meet you."

With that, I quickly stepped around him, wrapping my arms around me to hold myself together, and left the library, letting the ice-cold wind sweep me away down the city street.

Visit https://ebookmass.com today to explore

a vast collection of ebooks across various genres, available in popular formats like PDF, EPUB, and MOBI, fully compatible with all devices. Enjoy a seamless reading experience and effortlessly download high-quality materials in just a few simple steps. Plus, don’t miss out on exciting offers that let you access a wealth of knowledge at the best prices!

TWO

I hated the restaurant business with a passion. Not only did one have the olfactory assault of bleach and grease to contend with, but for someone who was extremely clumsy, a restaurant environment was less than ideal. Furthermore, there is a very large percentage of the population that is well-suited for customer service, including a smaller portion that is always happy and helpful and thus ideal for a job like waiting tables. But then there is also a tiny portion of the population that consists of individuals like me. People made me very uncomfortable and waiting tables was not a good occupation for someone who could not hold a conversation with an acquaintance much less a stranger.

After struggling through taking an order from a table of five, three of them kids, I put in the order and leaned against one of the kitchen walls as though to hold it up. I had not obviously messed anything up taking the order, but the parents had clearly been happy and ready for good service when I arrived at the table and by the time I had left, they were reserved and a little confused.

The job was harsh enough on my self-esteem and my never-ending physical exhaustion, but to add to it the social awkwardness always dredged up memories of how I had acquired it. Ostracism was one of those words that most kids do not pick up until late high school or after, but I had known it well many years before that. Everyone at school had known what happened to my family. Their sudden and completely unexplainable death had made national headlines thanks to its air of the strange and tragic. Paired with my unforgettable last name, I was forever branded by my family's death, not just in my own scarred mind, but socially now as well. Among adults, the reaction when they realized my identity was usually pity and unhelpful advice to 'help me cope'. Among my peers it was fear, discomfort, and fuel for teasing. With vague memories of my family plaguing my mind, I never had a childhood and was always the sort of person who was much more mature, much more depressed, and much less naïve than my peers. I did not have the patience to listen to them complain about their parents taking their GameBoys away or, later on, refusing to buy them new cellphones. I rarely talked to them even when they gave me a chance to. Being quiet and indifferent would've been more than enough to label me as the scapegoat, but beyond that, I loved reading and learned a lot from the books I picked up. American students are generally not kind to "teachers' pets".

Naturally, I was tortured mercilessly from the age of four until I graduated and escaped to college, where I was finally granted a clean slate. By then the damage had been done, though. I had been deprived of any social skills.

Catcalls and teasing rhymes were not what haunted me long after my school years, though. There were far crueler specters that chased and clawed after me endlessly through my waitressing shifts at the casual restaurant two blocks from my apartment. Throughout the night, I would constantly face the horror and awkwardness of trying to take orders and failing to fake enthusiasm or amiability in the process.

I rubbed my temples to try and force Nina Faucett's malignant voice from my head. The loud music blasting through the noisy, greasy kitchen usually managed to drown out her chants of "Orphan" echoing through my mind, but not always. She'd had one of those unforgettable voices that could not ever be ignored. It was loud, always seeming to bounce through a room like an all-around speaker system, and had a slightly high, grating pitch, combined with an eerie, faintly vicious tone. It was the sort of voice you expected from a charismatic person who tortured squirrels in their backyard as a child.

Gigi, my coworker at Starbucks, seemed to have gotten all the good genes in the Faucett family. Nina, who was my age, was like a scantily-clad beast from Hell. If one person I knew besides myself was suffering from some kind of mental disorder, without a second of hesitation, I would guess it was Nina. She was tall, with flaming red hair and green eyes that reminded me of the way I pictured the cat from *Pet Sematary*, a combination that made her even look mentally deranged. She had graciously bestowed the name "Orphan" upon me and I kept it throughout elementary and middle school. By high school, my name had evolved into "Freak". A few years back, I had read in the paper that she'd been charged with harassment and battery and hoped she was spending an interlude in Maryland State Penitentiary.

"Poe? You okay, honey?"

I sighed and looked up, smiling grimly at the head waitress, Janie. "Yeah. Headache again. I'm starting to think it's a clinical problem."

She looked down her thin nose at me, dark eyes piercing. Everyone I spent time around seemed to be at least six inches taller than me, Janie in particular. She grimaced and shook her head disapprovingly. "God, Poe, have you seen those poor eyes of yours? It's sleep deprivation that's giving you headaches."

Sighing once more, I looked down at my shoes. "Maybe. I'll try to get to sleep earlier tonight. Maybe that'll help."

"You'd better," she said, only half-teasing. With nothing further, she balanced four plates of burgers on her arms and flew like a hawk out to the dining room, shouting orders enthusiastically as she went. I rolled my eyes at my foolishness at standing still when Janie was working and rubbed my temples once more, then hurried back to work before anyone else lectured me. It was bad enough that I was never tipped well, but now it looked like my disposition might cost me the entire job.

The problem was that going to bed earlier doesn't cure insomnia. Maybe someone like me wasn't meant to be a

waitress anyway.

--<-~*~->--

When I got home that night, I wearily changed into pajamas and sought out a can of Campbell's Tomato Soup, dumping its contents and the required can of water into a small pot on the stove. My legs and stomach muscles ached from the effort of running amok in the dining room for six hours and I had been tipped horribly, as per usual. The restaurant was in the part of Baltimore where you could not really expect good tips, especially if you were a bad waitress.

The bleak thoughts of my lousy jobs, neither of which I liked, brought my mood down even further and I elected to mentally review the day, searching for anything worth dwelling on. As I stirred the soup, my mind wandered once more back to Frost. I bit my lip in distaste at the memories and tried desperately not to think too badly of myself, but it wasn't easy.

Aside from being an Edgar Allan Poe fanatic, Frost was the sort of kindred spirit I had never thought I'd find. He seemed to have an element of depth and dark memories that he descended into once or twice in the course of our conversations. He might have even understood what I had been through…

And the steel door slammed shut again.

I had turned him down flat. Walked away without so much as a parting glance, a chance for him to respond to my abruptness. Baltimore was not a small city. It was an absolute miracle I had seen him more than once that day and not one that would ever be repeated. I would never see him again. For all I knew, his name wasn't even Frost.

The soup began to seize and convulse in its pot and I removed it from the burner.

--<-~*~->--

The next morning followed the same routine as every day. I awoke to vicious nightmares three times in the course of the night, earning myself an estimated three hours or less of genuine sleep, and was up before my alarm went off at five. This time, I walked to Starbucks, too tired, dejected, and on-time to bother with running. The November wind whipped around me like a maelstrom and as I walked down the occasionally icy sidewalk in the glow of the lampposts, I worked the calculations in my head on what I owed this month in rent and tuition payments. I needed a new coat; as Carol had alluded, this winter was going to be a real killer and if I wanted to survive I would need a little more than a jean jacket and extra sweaters.

Gavin wasn't keen on talking that morning any more than the one prior. He just gave me a weird Star Trek sort of salute as I relieved him, then evacuated the coffee shop at a near-run, his techno music blasting through his eardrums as he went. There were only two customers in that morning when I arrived, so I fished out my battered paperback copy of *Jane Eyre* from under the counter and leaned against the register to read. The novel easily transported me to a better place, the English countryside, and to a world I could relate to, could empathize with, and, above all, could inhabit safely. No memories or nightmares could chase me as far as Thornfield Hall.

When Gigi relieved me of my post at noon, there had been no accidents resulting in scalded hands. There also had been no sign of Frost, which didn't surprise me in the least, but left me with a strange and foreign twisting feeling in my stomach. He had a job, I assumed. Clearly yesterday had been a fluke, or maybe his day off.

I escaped Starbucks before Gigi could comment on my half of a peanut butter sandwich and took off for the library at a relaxed run. The buildings around me, the people on the sidewalks, the cars zooming along the street, everything melted away as it always seemed to when I ran. There was nothing but the pounding of my battered sneakers on the pavement, the beating of my heart in my head, the whisper of my lungs working in my chest. Even the frosty lampposts and pavement seemed to fall away.

The warm, seductive scent of fresh-baked bread stopped both my thoughts and my feet in their tracks and I paused at the door of a small family bakery, hesitating and thinking of the miserable half sandwich in my jacket pocket. After a long minute of internal debate, I walked on, staring at the salt scattered across the sidewalk as I tried to fight off the crest-fallen feeling the less logical side of me was displaying. I had just been thinking to myself that morning that I needed a new jacket and I did, desperately. Even now, without the wind whirling around me and threatening to blow me over, my arms were numb with the cold. Fresh bakery bread was not a luxury I could afford.

I climbed the steps of the library and hurried through the doors, breathing a sigh of comfort and relief as the warmth of the building and the smell of books greeted me. Carol wasn't at the front desk and that was fine with me. I wasn't really in the mood for small talk anyway. I needed to write.

Throughout my life, I had always had the ability and the gift to escape into books, whether I was reading them or writing them. Writing was best, though, because it was like a diary. Pieces of what I was feeling, the emotions that I spent each day drowning in, found their way into my writing and would often stay there, locked away in my flashdrive for a long time. It was a safe haven, an oasis in which I could find respite from daily trials and wicked recollections.

I reached the computer terminals and logged in, then made to retrieve my flashdrive from my jeans pocket.

My fingers found only my apartment keys and lint.

Panic surged through me instantly, overtaking me like a drug. My eyes went wide and my heart raced in terror. I didn't have a single file on that flashdrive backed up. All of my writing, all of it, was on that flashdrive save for a few hard-copy print-outs and spiral-notebook drafts. Thousands of hours of work and pain were on that flashdrive. It was my life, my ticket to my dreams of being a novelist, my diary, my soul. My soul was on that damn flashdrive.

I logged off the computer and scrambled, nearly tipping over my chair in the process, to check all the USB ports on all the terminals. Then, I checked all the desks. I checked the floor all around me and panicked some more.

Trying to calm my frantic pulse, I bolted to the front desk, interrupting the librarian there with another customer as I demanded, "Did you see a flashdrive? I lost it yesterday. Has anyone turned it in?"

The librarian frowned and shook her head. "No, miss. Are you sure you didn't just misplace it?"

I thoroughly checked all my jeans pockets and my jacket pockets, pulling out my crushed sandwich and tossing it on the desk in the process, failing to notice or care that the customer the librarian had been helping was looking at me the way he would if I was barking like a dog.

"Maybe it's at home," I said desperately, not finding the flashdrive. The librarian nodded urgently, clearly trying to get me out of the building, and I sprinted out the double doors, running down the street back towards my apartment building. People on the sidewalk gave me dirty looks and shouted as I ran into them, but I hardly noticed. I needed to find that flashdrive.

The muscles in my stomach and sides were already burning when I reached the building. By the time I had dashed up the stairs to the third floor, my entire torso was cramping up and the muscles were quivering with strain. At my apartment door, I struggled to fish my keys out of my pocket, then, as I made to push them into the lock, cried out in pain and crumpled to the filthy hallway carpeting. The flooring in various parts of the building reeked of vomit or urine, this spot included, but I didn't even notice it through the pain in my stomach. Tears came to my eyes and I blinked hard to force them back. Pulling myself shakily to my feet, I unlocked the door and limped in, massaging the cramps out of my muscles with my fingers and knuckles. The pain eased slightly and I began to frantically search the apartment as I had the library. After nearly an hour of endless searching and no success, I had to choke back tears again, this time at the prospect of having truly lost my flashdrive and everything on it for good. When I had finally regained my composure, I racked my brain and settled on Starbucks. The flashdrive had surely fallen out of my pocket while I was working.

I dashed back out of the apartment, pausing to lock the door again and jam the key in my front jeans pocket, then bolted down the stairs. The muscles in my stomach that had flared up earlier began to scream at me in protest once again and by the time I reached the front door of the building, I was grimacing in pain.

I rubbed my stomach muscles under my jean jacket, trying to will away the cramping and agony. As I was focusing on ridding myself of the pain, I slipped through the doors of the building and immediately slid on the freshly-formed ice. For a fraction of a second, panic flooded my veins and I thought I was surely going to break a bone when I hit the pavement, but a set of strong arms latched around my shoulders and steadied me. When my feet were firmly on solid pavement and my heart rate had slowed, I disentangled myself from the stranger's arms and turned to thank them, only to find that it was not a stranger at all. I jumped in shock and nearly slipped on the ice again.

Frost held up his hands in surrender and apology. "I didn't mean to…startle you. Sorry," he stammered. Clearly, this wasn't the meeting he'd planned, which made me wonder exactly what he had planned.

I blinked and my thoughts cleared, paving the way for annoyance and disgust. "What are you doing here?" I asked bluntly. "You are stalking me, aren't you?"

Frost winced. "'Stalking' is a strong word." He held up a finger to ask me to wait and I frowned at him incredulously. After a moment of rifling through the pocket of his leather jacket, he produced my flashdrive. My eyes went wide and I snatched it from his hand, then took a step away protectively. "What were you doing with that? I was in a panic looking for it! My life is on that flashdrive!" I snapped at him, accusing him with my eyes.

He smiled slightly, his eyes sparkling teasingly as he slid his hands into his jeans pockets. "You left the library so fast yesterday that I couldn't catch up to you to give it to you. You left it in the USB port."

"I…" I hesitated. The terror of losing my flashdrive had quickly subsided into relief and alternate confusion. "How did you find me here?"

Frost raised an eyebrow and the corners of his mouth curled into a gentle smile. "Poe, your full name was on each document on there. I used a phonebook."

My jaw dropped in alarm. "You *read my work?!"*

He rolled his eyes at the tone. "Calm down, will you? This isn't that ridiculous. And I did not read it; I knew you'd be offended and self-conscious, so I just looked for your name. Would it have really been better if I used the police database to look you up?"

Feeling a little less violated, I decided to let him turn this into a full-blown conversation. "Why do you have access to the police database?" I asked skeptically.

"Because I'm a cop," he answered with a broad grin. "I have connections."

A cop? My guard instantly went up again. I knew I was in the database and that he could read my whole life story by looking my name up. At the click of a button, this man who seemed strangely interested in me and was quite possibly stalking me could read all my darkest secrets. "What kind of cop?"

"Homicide detective." Frost seemed to sense my renewed coldness and his sense of humor began to melt into concern. He looked down at the ice awkwardly. "Um…this isn't something I normally do. I hope you realize that. I'm a detective, not a stalker or a player. I don't mean to upset or scare you." I winced and turned away from him, clutching at my cramping muscles. As I faced away from him, I let my features contort in pain and gritted my teeth, trying desperately not to scream at what felt like serrated knifes being drilled into my torso. "I looked up your address to return your flashdrive. I was hoping for more, but I can leave if you want me to. You won't hear from me again," Frost continued to assure me, his voice embarrassed and uncomfortable. I wasn't listening anymore, though. I was too busy calculating whether I could walk to the restaurant for work, much less make it through my whole shift. Hell, I'd have a hard enough time getting back upstairs to my apartment on the third floor. Suddenly, I felt the slightest weight of his hand on my shoulder and I grimaced. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," I hissed through my teeth. "I'm fine. Please go."

He didn't, though. He remained there, his hand gentle on my shoulder, his breathing tight with concern. "Look at me." I shook my head mechanically, trying to swallow the agony even as I attempted to fake normalcy. "Please, are you okay?" He stepped around me to meet my gaze and his hand tightened on my shoulder in alarm. "Poe…"

"I'm fine," I hissed again, trying to compose myself and ignore the worry in his expression. "Just…a stomachache."

"You didn't even react when you poured scalding coffee on your hands. If this is causing you this much pain, it's not normal. You should get to a hospital."

I swallowed hard and met his ice-blue eyes coldly. "It's normal for me and I do not go to hospitals for anything."

"Just tell me what I can do, then."

I was about to snap at him again and tell him to go away, but then I hesitated. I needed to get up to my apartment, but I was fairly certain I could not get to the staircase in my condition, much less up three flights of it. It would be as simple for me to climb Mount Everest. I needed help. "Fine. Help me get upstairs to my apartment."

Frost kept his hand tight on my shoulder as we entered the building. I was still walking fairly normally when we reached the stairwell, clutching my stomach and hissing in pain, but upright and moving forward of my own volition. At the base of the stairs, Frost paused to ask me, "What floor?"

"Third," I moaned, gritting my teeth.

He looked down at me in renewed concern. "Isn't there an elevator or something?"

I chuckled grimly, rolling my eyes as I asked him, "What part of Baltimore do you live in?"

He rolled his icy eyes in response and put his arm around my shoulders to steady me and help me step up. I gripped the cold, thin rail and eased my way up the first flight, grimacing in pain as my muscles tightened further with the effort. As we reached the second floor landing, I groaned and gasped, "Stop, stop, hang on…"

Frost stopped immediately and let me lean back against the graffiti-stained wall, biting his lip in uncertainty as I caught my breath. "You said this is normal?"

"Fairly," I responded, my guard slowly easing back up.

"But what is it from?" His eyes had narrowed and seemed to pierce through my soul. I felt transparent and I could understand how a man like this, young as he was, could become a successful homicide detective. He seemed to be the sort of person who could quickly come to know people better than they knew themselves. From knowing him one day, I could see all too clearly that he was brilliant and would have done well as a lawyer or neurosurgeon if he wasn't so suited to detective work. "Car accident," I lied. "I was in a car accident when I was seventeen and my stomach muscles were badly torn up."

I could tell by the unwavering steadiness of his eyes that he didn't believe a word I said, but after a moment, the piercing expression lifted and as I seen him do before, he filed away the conversation for later study. "Are you okay?"

I hesitated, evaluating the pain I was in and whether I could make it up the second flight of stairs yet. After a moment, I nodded. "Yeah."

Frost reached out a hand to me and I took it gingerly, still worried about just how much he'd seen through me. Just how much did he know? Did I really believe he hadn't looked me up in the police database, hadn't perused my file at the BPD? Not remotely, but I knew there was no way I could get to my apartment alone without collapsing and probably falling down these stairs, breaking a bone or worse. The stairwell was concrete and I could very easily crack my skull open if I fell back.

He put his arm around my shoulders as before and helped me make my way up, one step at a time. By the eighth step, near the top, my stomach was clenching as if something was chewing and tearing my muscles. My mind instantly went to Cujo and I actually glanced down to make sure I wasn't dragging a St. Bernard up the stairs by its teeth. There was not a dog there, of course, but the pain was growing unbearable. I tightened my eyes shut and whimpered, my breathing stopping altogether in agony. "Poe?" Frost asked quietly, worriedly. Before he could say anything beyond my name, though, a shot of pain rippled through my torso as if I'd been ripped in half. I screamed and my knees buckled beneath me.

Frost's arms locked around my midsection, catching me and easing me down to lie across the steps. As he knelt beside me, saying my name over and over, trying to get me to respond, I wondered vaguely how far down the stairs I would have fallen had he not caught me. From the way my legs gave out beneath me, I would not be lying if I said that I would've rolled backwards and possibly broken my neck. I moaned weakly as another shot of pain racked through me and Frost easily, gently, shifted me onto my back and slid his arms beneath me, lifting me up and carrying me slowly up the stairs like a small child.

As we passed through the third floor stairwell door, Frost asked me, "What number?"

I groaned, trying to hold back tears as my insides burned. "Thirty-six."

As Frost hurried down the hall, saying the apartment numbers out loud as he passed each door, he said urgently, "I'm going to need your key."

We approached door number thirty-six and I gasped, "Put me down. I'll get it myself."

Frost eased me to my feet, helping me to lean against the wall beside the door. I gripped and tried to massage out the cramps in my muscles with one hand and, with the other, dug in my front jeans pocket for the key. After some difficulty and another wince of pain, I produced the little bronze key and handed it to Frost. He took it immediately and began struggling with the aging, warped lock as I tightened my eyes, holding in a scream. *I've had worse, I've had so much worse…*

Frost finally shoved the door open wide and took my arm, helping me in and closing the door behind him. "Do you have any pain medications or muscle relaxants?" he asked, moving with me into the tiny living area directly beyond the threshold. I nodded and hissed, "Kitchen cupboard. By the fridge. I don't need water." Frost readjusted his grip, his fingers tightening on my bare hand, sending warmth across my skin. I avoided shivering at the touch and he helped me to a seat on the couch, then rushed back into the kitchen, flinging open the indicated cupboard. The cupboard door slammed against the adjacent fridge with a resounding *crack* and if I wasn't in pain, I would have given him hell for breaking my furniture. He muttered something to himself as he sought out the pain medication and I realized too late just how full my medicine cabinet was of various pain killers, anti-depressants, sleeping pills and my old PTSD prescriptions. I turned slightly, trying to see him from where I sat, but before I could crane my neck far enough, he'd returned with the indicated bottle. Hands shaking at not only the pain now, but also shame at everything he must have seen in the cabinet, I struggled to pry the little orange container open and shake three pills into the palm of my hand. Without hesitating, I tossed them back and swallowed them instantly, then gave him back the capped bottle. He placed it silently on the book-covered, shabby coffee table before us and sat beside me on the couch.

I studied my hands on my stomach carefully, letting my dark hair fall forward as a curtain between his eyes and my red face. Shame polluted my mind and I thought of the water stains on the ceiling, the peeling wallpaper, the warped door, the creaking floorboards, the mold I had tried and failed to kill beneath the kitchen sink. And this man had assumed my building would have an elevator. He had money and was probably looking at me right now as if I was homeless, but additionally, he was probably judging me based on those medications. There were a lot of opium-derivatives in that cupboard; addictive, dangerous pain killers and anti-anxiety medications. Anti-depressants meant to treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The heaviest sleeping pills doctors can legally give out. What did I look like to him? He probably thought I was insane, addicted to opium, and dirt-poor. Disgusting, no doubt. Why had I let him in? Why had I let him help me? I could have made it up the stairs myself eventually. And I certainly could have dismissed him as soon as we reached my apartment door. What had I been thinking?

Frost gently touched my hand with the tips of his fingers and immediately some of the tension fell away. My mind raced. There was no way he could not have seen what else was in that medicine cupboard. There was no way he was not judging me even as he touched my hand. To judge was human nature. Why then, was he…touching me? Reassuring me? Comforting me?

"Why are you still here?" I asked, my voice numb with confusion.

Frost didn't say anything for a long moment, finally replying, "Do you want me to go?"

I thought about it; this was my chance to ask him to leave, to get him out of my life and far away where he couldn't do me any more harm. I did not want to get hurt again and he would surely do just that. So, why did the image of him walking out that door frighten me so? "No," I finally answered.

"Then why do you ask?"

I lifted a now tear-streaked face from my hands to look at him. His eyes were molten ice, concern and worry alive in them, drowning any trace of judgment, if it were even present at all. "Because I don't understand why you'd want to stay."

He frowned deeply, something haunted stirring within him at my answer. "Because…" he hesitated, then said, "Because I care, Poe. Why wouldn't I stay?"

I blinked. I'd never heard anyone say those two words together in my life. *I care*. I imagined in my mind his warm voice repeating the words "I care" over and over, the sweet way they rolled off his tongue, like water. He barely knew me and we'd scarcely spoken. No one cared about me, not even my foster parents. How could any of this possibly make any sense? How could he truly want to help someone like me? What would his reward be? He tilted his head, puzzled by something I'd given away in my expression. "What is it?"

I shook my head slowly, tears silently falling over my cheeks. "It's nothing, I'm just…not used to being cared for. Especially by someone I only just met."

Frost smiled warmly, briefly, and then the concern returned to his eyes. He glanced down at my afflicted muscles, concealed as they were by my sweater and jean jacket, then returned his gaze to my eyes. "Better?"

I gritted my teeth against another spasm of pain. "A little. It takes awhile to take effect." I leaned heavily against the soft cushions of the couch, trying to relax manually. "Thank you, Frost. I don't know how to repay you."

He looked down at his hands on his knees. "It's not really the sort of thing I ask payment for."

"Not for helping me upstairs," I clarified. He met my eyes again in puzzlement. "For not judging me."

His eyes narrowed infinitesimally and something grim and knowing flicked across them. "I don't judge people by their scars. That's another thing I don't ask payment for."

I frowned and began to study *him*. There was a depth that I had recognized earlier as profound intelligence in his eyes, but it was more than that. His eyes were the eyes of someone who had seen something they shouldn't have. I had come to know many cops, doctors, and psychologists as a result of my dark past and I'd seen things similar, but not like Frost. Those eyes of molten ice were undeniably haunted, not so different from the dark brown eyes I knew from the mirror. "You're not like most people, Frost."

Something about the line of his jaw became guarded and in an eerie sort of moment, I recognized what my expression must often look like when people asked me questions I didn't want to answer. It was strange being on the other side of a steel door slamming shut. "I could say the same about you, Poe."

"I know," I said, my voice soft and cautious. I felt like this young man with the strange blue eyes was not such a stranger anymore. It no longer seemed important that I did not know his first name. I knew that he was much more like me than he let on, that, perhaps, he was almost as broken as I was. I hesitated, the wheels turning in my mind as I contemplated what to do now. Fear curled around me like black smoke, choking me and replacing the oxygen in my veins, pumping death into every one of my cells. I couldn't breathe out of fear as the tension in the room grew.

He was only inches from me. I hadn't realized it until now, but his knee was almost touching mine, his shoulders were twisted to face me head-on and his chest was only about four inches from my shoulder. His arm, draped over the back of the couch, was even closer. There was the soft, warm scent of his skin and a gentle but intoxicating cologne in the air. It was quiet and anything but imposing, almost like the nearly non-existent but sweet, warm scent of cookie dough, and it made my stomach ache in a not-unpleasant way. His face, those brilliant eyes, those soft, gentle lips, could only be six, perhaps seven inches from my own. I wanted him to kiss me, to hold my hand, to wrap those strong arms around me. I wanted his lips on mine more than I'd ever wanted anything. I had only met him yesterday and I wanted everything about him.

And yet…

That fear, that smoke, choked me, drowned me, was suffocating, killing me. I could feel it in the air, hot, chalky, and wholly tangible around me. In my head, I could hear malicious laughter, the cackling I knew only too well from my most awful nightmares.

Tears rose in my eyes again and I turned away from him, still not breathing, trying to hide my terror at the thought of wanting him. "Poe?" he whispered, his voice like the fluttering of a feather through a spring breeze. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I swallowed hard, trying to bottle my emotions back up again. "Fine. Sorry," I said tightly. I grimaced as my stomach cramped back up with the tension in my chest. My thin, bony fingers clenched into fists and I dug them into my torso, trying to rub out the pain even as I marveled at how tiny my hands had gotten. My hands had always been very small; Mrs. Aaron, my foster-mother, liked to claim they were cherubic. But in the past several years, they had gotten so thin that my knuckles stood out and the joints looked almost arthritic I was so thin. Vaguely, I wondered how much weight I had lost since I'd been broken the last time. I refused to go to a doctor and didn't own a scale. I imagined I had lost around twenty pounds, though, and there really hadn't been much of me to lose to begin with.

Suddenly, warmth fell upon my clenched fists and I froze, staring down through my tears at Frost's hands cupping mine. After a long moment, I met his gaze cautiously, fearfully. There was nothing but sadness and sympathy in those molten eyes. No hurt that I was pushing him away, no fear of who I might be, no pity for what he guessed had been done to me, no gentle distance as he planned which psychologist to refer me to. He knew more than he deserved. A man that inherently good did not deserve to understand and sympathize with my pain. He didn't deserve something that awful. "What can I do?" he whispered.

I shivered. The warring sides of my soul, the side that wanted life and the side that wanted safety, were burning me alive inside. I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't know what I needed. I didn't know anything.

"I'll stay until you ask me to leave. I won't ask any questions. I won't say anything unless you want me to," he vowed seriously, trying to reassure me. I nodded mutely, still scared, still mortified at the side of me that he was seeing. No one knew this part of me. Not even my foster-mother. I didn't let anyone see this, ever.

So, we just sat there in silence, Frost facing forward now, his spiked blond hair leaned back against the couch, his blue eyes shut. My heart beat uncontrollably with the remaining fear, the remnants of my nightmares still echoing through my head,

but slowly, gradually, my pulse began to slow to a more even rhythm. Gradually, the fear and confusion ceased.

Once I was certain that my sanity was no longer in jeopardy, I asked him timidly, "So you're a homicide detective?"

"Mm-hm," he intoned, not opening his eyes yet. Despite how deranged he no doubt thought I was, he seemed perfectly at ease, almost on the verge of falling asleep. "Does that bother you?"

"No," I frowned. "Does it bother other people?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "It bothers my family. Most of them are just worried about me, as if I'm chasing killers without a service weapon."

"Most? Not all?"

His mouth tightened with displeasure at the thought. "My father wanted me to be a surgeon, like him. I was always good in school. Smart, I guess. He insisted I would do well in medical school and be as successful as him. I said that smart people make good homicide detectives too. He wishes I'd chosen differently."

"Do you still talk to him?"

He nodded vaguely. "I come home once a week for dinner as a family. We small-talk, but that's all. There's always this underlying tension. He's kind of passive-aggressive."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm not. I'm happy as a detective." Frost smiled jokingly and opened his eyes to look at me, the blue ice in them sparkling. "What about you, Miss Poe? Did your family tell you there are better things than Starbucks and a library computer?"

I felt the muscles in my jaw tighten and I bit my tongue to hold back a wince. "Actually, my foster-parents told me things like that many, many times."

The tension immediately exploded once more around us. Frost hesitated, then said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. I won't ask if you don't want to tell me."

I shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "It's been a long time. When I was two, my family died and left me to my mother's good friend and her husband. There isn't too much to tell."

"Car accident?"

I swallowed to compose myself and, after a moment, I met his gaze steadily and replied, "Unnamed fatal disease. My mother died first, but before she went, it passed to my father, brother and sister. They were all gone in the course of Christmas week. I thought everyone in Baltimore knew the story. Honestly, it's nice to be proven wrong."

He frowned deeply. "You survived?"

I turned away, shrugging once more. "I guess I was never infected. A two-year-old couldn't possibly have the strength to fight something like that off."

A moment of silence fell in which I could feel those eyes of molten ice peering right through my protective shell, reading me for what I really was, seeing into my soul. "I think that some people are stronger than we could possibly imagine. Some people survive everything."

I could feel my hands shaking, but I had no control over them. "I think you're right," I whispered.

His eyes softened, turning warm and sad. Cautiously, as if afraid I would either run away or break, he raised a hand and ever-so-gently touched my cheek with his warm fingertips, brushing away the remnants of tears. "Poe…" he whispered softly.

I swallowed hard, trying to no avail to steady my quivering voice. "I met you at Starbucks yesterday. I don't even know your first name."

"It's Caleb."

"Caleb, then. But, still, you don't know my name either."

"It's Poe. Elenora Allison Poe," he muttered softly. "Remember? I stalked you."

I chuckled grimly. "Ah, yes. Very reassuring." I hesitated, staring into those eyes and wishing to God that I could just fall into them. "Frost, I don't trust people. Not just people I don't know, but anyone."

"Why not?"

His thumb stroked my cheekbone softly and I shivered at the all-too welcome touch. "Because in my life, I've learned that people are almost never worthy of trust. You're a cop. There are terrible people everywhere and you know it."

"Do you think I'm terrible, Poe?"

I hesitated and looked down at my still-clenched fists in shame, the color rising in my cheeks. "I don't know. I've never known any good people. My foster-mother came close, but she was never strong enough to be good."

Frost sighed softly, his breath warm on my face. "There's more to life than running from nightmares."

"That depends on the nightmares you have," I whispered, my voice like broken glass. I stood up from the couch and turned away from him, wrapping my arms around myself as I had in the library the day before, holding the pieces of me together as the tears returned to my eyes. I heard Frost ease to a stand from the couch, then take several slow, measured steps towards me. As my body shuddered with pent-up emotion, Frost rested his warm hand on my upper arm, standing a step or two

behind me. My face contorted into a grimace he couldn't see. "Promise me something?" he asked quietly, sadly.

"I don't make promises," I gasped, my emotions like a tidal wave ready to break down a dam.

"This one will never hurt you."

The words cut through me like a knife and I looked over my shoulder at him, composing my features as much as I could beforehand. I shuddered at the overwhelming understanding, concern and…something unidentifiable in his eyes. "What?" I asked, the question coming out like a surrender.

Frost handed me a tiny scrap of paper with his name and cellphone number scrawled on it. "Call me if you need help. I will answer and I will come if you ever need me. For anything."

I took the number and studied him in confusion. "Why are you doing this?"

His thumb softly stroked my arm once, then he withdrew his hand and replied, "Because you're worth helping, Poe."

I didn't have anything to say to that. I stood there in numb, frozen shock as Frost stepped around me to the door, looking back to me as he opened it. "I mean it," he said, the full honesty and urgency in his eyes more powerful than any other measure he'd taken to help me.

The door fell shut after him and in the overwhelming silence of the tiny apartment, I stared down at the phone number in shock and awe.

THREE

By the next day I had fully recovered from the embarrassing incident with my muscles, but not from how I had handled Frost. There was so much more to him than he let on. I had seen it in his eyes yesterday when he'd told me that some people survive everything. That depth, that darkness, that pain and undying understanding in his icy blue eyes held the weight of the world. There were few people out there that knew the darker sides of the world that well. I was one of them. And, it seemed, Frost was another.

The problem was that the dark pieces of the world could build some people up and tear others down. I still wasn't sure which had been done to me. Some people grew stronger as a result of the trials they faced, but others were broken by them, even driven insane by them.

Nina Faucett was of the sort that I suspected had a medical condition causing her madness. She had been deranged and cruel as long as I'd known her, dating back to preschool. I remembered rumors circling in high school that she took pills and most people had assumed she did drugs, but my guess was that they were prescriptions for a psychological disorder. Other people, though, became mad because of the awful things they saw.

I'd known one victim of acquired madness.

Lex Rydenor, my boyfriend of about two weeks in my junior year of high school, had been horrifically abused by his mother as a child. He had never told me or anyone else that, but I could infer it. From my experience delving into characters with my writing, I had a good understanding of how people worked. The way she had treated him as a child had driven him not only to hate women, but to become physically violent. Lex's mother had turned him into a monster.

I shook my head violently to clear it as I walked down the cold Baltimore street, trying desperately to rid my brain of Lex. He was the last thing I needed on my mind right then.

I took a turn into a subdivision, a rare high-class section of the city, complete with fancy streetlamps, cobblestone sidewalks, and monstrous rowhouses with tiny lawns groomed to perfection. The Heights was the sort of neighborhood that egotistical businessmen, like Jonathan Aaron, adored and flaunted their houses in. It was also the sort of neighborhood that was eerily quiet during the day like this, when virtually every inhabitant save my foster-mother was off at work.

I came to the Aaron's rowhouse, slipping through the wrought iron gate and stepping quietly up the stone walkway past flowerbeds that had been immaculate until the weather killed them. The little gardens reeked of death, the overpowering stench of wilting and rotting flowers overwhelming. At the massive, white colonial door, I rang the doorbell and gritted my teeth as the reviled goofy song I had triggered played throughout the house. The unique doorbell was one of many things that brought back nauseating memories of my childhood, if it could even be called that. I rubbed my fingers to keep the blood moving in them despite the cold and leaned against the wide door, waiting. After a short while, there was an ominous *bang* followed by a blood-curdling scream from within. My eyes widened in shock and I knocked sharply on the door, my pulse quickening at thoughts of my tiny foster-mother being shot by a burglar. Just as I was beginning to think she was dead, the icy silence of the neighborhood was shattered. "Door's open!" she shouted from within the house.

I rolled my eyes. I entered the house gingerly as I called, "Mrs. Aaron? Everything alright?"

"Poe? Come help me with this!" she replied, sounding mildly distressed. I rolled my eyes again and followed her voice towards the kitchen. Mrs. Aaron was the epitome of an average, middle-aged, pudgy damsel in distress. The greatest of the villains conspiring against her was her mom's lasagna recipe and it seemed like every time I visited her I had to help her clean up the kitchen following another explosion or similar tragedy.

With every step I took into the white, ice-cold house, my stomach twisted more and more. Every perfectly-polished cherry floorboard, every flawlessly-placed flower arrangement screamed my foster-father's obsessive compulsive rants back at me from my memories. I could hear him shouting at me from across the years, could feel his large hands bruising my shoulders as he shook me by them.

Upon entering the kitchen, I froze in the doorway and looked around, wide-eyed. Mrs. Aaron was standing in the middle of the kitchen, covered in suspicious-looking red goo. The red was covering nearly every inch of the kitchen, including and certainly not limited to the floor, ceiling, wallpaper, counters, pots and pans hanging above the island, fridge, sink, and cookbook on the bar. The microwave door was open and smoke was pouring out of it, along with more red dripping from the dark abyss. I raised my eyebrows and grabbed a wet dishcloth to use to mop the red off Mrs. Aaron's face. Upon closer observation, I confirmed my suspicions that the red was tomato sauce. "Mrs. Aaron, you're not supposed to put lasagna in the microwave. Did you use a metal pan too?"

She shrugged sheepishly. "I thought it would be quicker than the oven. I guess I forgot about the pan. Do I own any glass ones?"

I smiled just a little. While it was a pain to clean up after Mrs. Aaron, occasions like this had become almost endearing to me. "They're in the cupboard next to the stove, right below the silverware drawer."

"Well, that explains a lot. I never go in that cupboard."

I shook my head and got the worst of the sauce off Mrs. Aaron's arms, then handed a new rag to her. Grabbing a magazine off the bar to fan the microwave with, I peeked inside. Sure enough, there was the cremated lasagna and blackened pan. I sighed and grabbed two oven mitts to remove the remains with and set the pan on the stovetop. Mrs. Aaron looked over at it and winced before returning to her mission wiping off the kitchen island.

"Maybe you should just avoid lasagna. You could cook something else…like that taco salad thing you used to make. That was usually good," I suggested in vain. I knew she would not consent, but it was always worth a try.

Predictably, Mrs. Aaron shook her head with a determined sharpness. With her short, lumpy figure and fluffy strawberry hair, she was not an overly formidable force to reckon with, but she was entertaining. "No. I have to get this right!" she snapped, her voice firm, but too high and flighty-sounding to be threatening. If I could describe Mrs. Aaron using an animal image, she would be a mouse.

I sighed. She still hadn't gotten the lasagna right after holding the recipe for fifteen years. Of course, for the first few years she had been too scared to try. Now, she waged her crusade on a regular basis, trashing the kitchen almost weekly and poisoning the foolish test-taster. Obviously, no one had died yet, but it was only a matter of time. For my own part, I hoped Jonathan Aaron died of salmonella poisoning.

Unlike my foster-father, I really did like my foster-mom. Mrs. Aaron was sweet and certainly amusing, hare-brained, in a word. She was always kind and doting to me, though she never once turned on her husband. I had never even gotten a pretzel out of her between meals. However, taking care of her gave me something to do as a break from work and writing.

As I helped Mrs. Aaron scrub the various kitchen counters and walls, I began to notice that something was not right. She was dropping things, acting even clumsier than usual. Twice I noticed her drop her dishcloth and once she let a pan fall from the hanging rack above the island, causing a crash rivaling the volume of a gunshot. I frowned and began watching her more closely. She was shooting glances at me, the clock above the stove, and the hall leading to the garage. I swallowed hard, feigning an indifferent, controlled tone. "So, what's new?"

"Oh, not much. Same old, same old, as they say," she answered, her voice anxious.

"And how is Mr. Aaron?"

She dropped a second pan and scrambled to retrieve it. As she stretched out her arm to snatch it from the hardwood floor, her sleeve pulled up slightly and my eyes locked on the purplish bruise ringing her wrist like a manacle. She chuckled quietly, everything about her a lie, and said, "Oh, I would hardly know. He's always working, you know."

"Right," I concurred, the wheels turning in my head as I wiped lasagna remains from the over-stocked liquor cabinet. "He doesn't know I'm visiting today, does he?"

"Oh, no! Of course not!" Mrs. Aaron squealed sharply. She was shaking from the top of her poofy hair to her tiny feet.

My pulse began to quicken again and I fought to keep my voice measured. "Because, you know, he doesn't like that I visit you when he's not around."

My foster-mother turned, trying to mold her face into an innocent smile. The innocence and naivety were easily achieved, but not the smile. "What would give you an idea like that?"

I half-smiled grimly. "Because if that front door opens when he's not around, even to bring the mail in, much less his despised foster-child, he goes into a tailspin. That's what he does best, isn't it?"

Mrs. Aaron's eyes hardened ever-so-slightly and she said sharply, "Poe, your father is a good man who has always provided well for this family. He's always been good to us."

My blood began to boil beneath my skin. "First of all," I began, my voice like ice, "He has never been my father. Second, this has never been my family. And lastly, your husband has never been a good man."

The hurt registered in my foster-mother's tiny hazel eyes before I had even finished my last accusation. The tears pooled in her eyes as they screamed at me, *I tried! He was a good man once! I tried!* She looked down at her red-stained shoes in sadness and I did the same in shame. "Mrs. Aaron, I'm sorry. That wasn't fair."

"I loved your mother, Poe. She was my best friend." She met my gaze, the tears falling slowly and steadily now. "I knew I wasn't going to be able to replace her, especially after…after Jonathan started…drinking." She swallowed hard and said softly, "But I always loved you like a daughter, Poe. I always tried."

Now, the tears came to my eyes. "Then why did you tell Mr. Aaron I'd be here today?"

Almost on cue, I could hear the rumbling of the garage door like a hungry beast and the squeal of tires as he spun into the driveway. My hands began to shake in anger and fear, but I stood my ground, refusing to allow myself to flee. Mrs. Aaron, on the other hand, panicked, her eyes going wide and her fists clenched together as she pleaded with me. "Poe, please go. I can explain another time, just please go!"

As always, Mrs. Aaron's fear came before her love for me. As always, what strength she had to be a measure of a mother for me was too little and too late. The door to the garage at the end of the hall burst open, the pane slamming into the wall and the handle bursting through the plaster with a resounding *ka-chunk.* The doorstop had been broken for years. I turned slowly, purposefully, to face my foster-father and watched as he stormed towards me, his face beet-red, and his suit jacket and tie flowing behind him like Dracula's cloak. "ELENORA!" he roared.

Visit https://ebookmass.com today to explore

a vast collection of ebooks across various genres, available in popular formats like PDF, EPUB, and MOBI, fully compatible with all devices. Enjoy a seamless reading experience and effortlessly download high-quality materials in just a few simple steps. Plus, don’t miss out on exciting offers that let you access a wealth of knowledge at the best prices!

Exploring the Variety of Random Documents with Different Content

"Jane Gerson. Yes, yes, it sounds German, I know. But that's not my fault. I'm an American—a red-hot American, too, for the last two weeks."

The sergeant's face was wooden.

"Where are you going?"

"To New York, on the *Saxonia*, just as soon as I can. And the British army can't stop me."

"Indeed!" The sergeant permitted himself a fleeting smile. "From Paris by motor, eh? Your passports, please."

"I haven't any," Jane retorted, with a shade of defiance. "They were taken from me in Spain, just over the French border, and were not returned."

The sergeant raised his eyebrows in surprise not unmixed with irony. He pointed to the two big osier baskets, demanding to know what they contained.

"Gowns—the last gowns made in Paris before the crash. Fashion's last gasp. I am a buyer of gowns for Hildebrand's store in New York."

Ecstatic gurgles of pleasure from Mrs. Sherman and her daughter greeted this announcement. They pressed about the baskets and regarded them lovingly.

The sergeant pushed them away and tried to throw back the covers.

"Open your baggage—all of it!" he commanded snappishly.

Jane, explaining over her shoulder to the women, stooped to fumble with the hasps.

"Seventy of the darlingest gowns—the very last Paul Poiret and Paquin and Worth made before they closed shop and marched away with their regiments. You shall see every one of them."

"Hurry, please, my time's limited!" the sergeant barked.

"I should think it would be—you're so charming," Jane flung back over her shoulder, and she raised the tops of the baskets. The other women pushed forward with subdued coos.

The sergeant plunged his hand under a mass of colored fluffiness, groped for a minute, and brought forth a long roll of heavy paper. With a fierce mien, he began to unroll the bundle.

"And these?"

"Plans," Hildebrand's buyer answered.

"Plans of what?" The sergeant glared.

"Of gowns, silly! Here—you're looking at that one upside down! This way! Now isn't that a perfect dear of an afternoon gown? Poiret didn't have time to finish it, poor man! See that lovely basque effect? Everything's *moyen age* this season, you know."

Jane, with a shrewd sidelong glance at the flustered sergeant, rattled on, bringing gown after gown from the baskets and displaying them to the chorus of smothered screams of delight from the feminine part of her audience. One she draped coquettishly from her shoulders and did an exaggerated step before the smoky mirror over the mantelpiece to note the effect.

"Isn't it too bad this soldier person isn't married, so he could appreciate these beauties?" She flicked a mischievous eye his way. "Of course he can't be married, or he'd recognize the plan of a gown. Clean hands, there, Mister Sergeant, if you're going to touch any of these dreams! Here, let me! Now look at that *musquetaire* sleeve—the effect of the war—military, you know."

The sergeant was thoroughly angry by this time, and he forced the situation suddenly near tragedy. Under his fingers a delicate girdle crackled suspiciously.

"Here—your knife! Rip this open; there are papers of some sort hidden here." He started to pass the gown to one of his soldiers. Jane choked back a scream.

"No, no! That's crinoline, stupid! No papers——" She stretched forth her arms appealingly. The sergeant humped his shoulders and put out his hand to take the opened clasp-knife.

A plump doll-faced woman, who possessed an afterglow of prettiness and a bustling nervous manner, flounced through the doors at this juncture and burst suddenly into the midst of the group caught in the imminence of disaster.

"What's this—what's this?" She caught sight of the filmy creation draped from the sergeant's arm. "Oh, the beauty!" This in a whisper of admiration.

"The last one made by Worth," Jane was quick to explain, noting the sergeant's confusion in the presence of the stranger, "and this officer is going to rip it open in a search for concealed papers. He takes me for a spy."

Surprised blue eyes were turned from Jane to the sergeant. The latter shamefacedly tried to slip the open knife into his blouse, mumbling an excuse. The blue eyes bored him through.

"I call that very stupid, Sergeant," reproved the angel of rescue. Then to Jane——

"Where are you taking all these wonderful gowns?"

"To New York. I'm buyer for Hildebrand's, and——"

"But, Lady Crandall, this young woman has no passports—nothing," the sergeant interposed. "My duty——"

"Bother your duty! Don't you know a Worth gown when you see it? Now go away! I'll be responsible for this young woman from now on. Tell your commanding officer Lady Crandall has taken your duty out of your hands." She finished with a quiet assurance and turned to gloat once more over the gowns. The sergeant led his command away with evident relief.

Lady Crandall turned to include all the refugees in a general introduction of herself.

"I am Lady Crandall, the wife of the governor general of Gibraltar," she said, with a warming smile. "I just came down to see what I could do for you poor stranded Americans. In these times——"

"An American yourself, I'll gamble on it!" Sherman pushed his way between the littered baskets and seized Lady Crandall's hands. "Knew it by the cut of your jib—and—your way of doing things. I'm Henry J. Sherman, from Kewanee, Illynoy—my wife and daughter Kitty."

"And I'm from Iowa—the red hills of ole Ioway," the governor's wife chanted, with an orator's flourish of the hands. "Welcome to the Rock, home folks!"

Hands all around and an impromptu old-home week right then and there. Lady Crandall's attention could not be long away from the gowns, however. She turned back to them eagerly. With Jane Gerson as her aid, she passed them in rapturous review, Mrs. Sherman and Kitty playing an enthusiastic chorus.

A pursy little man with an air of supreme importance—Henry Reynolds he was, United States Consul at Gibraltar—catapulted in from the street while the gown chatter was at its noisiest. He threw his hands above his head in a mock attitude of submissiveness before a highwayman.

"'S all fixed, ladies and gentlemen," he cried, with a showman's eloquence. "Here's Lady Crandall come to tell you about it, and she's so busy riding her hobby—gowns and millinery and such—she has forgotten. I'll bet dollars to doughnuts."

"Credit to whom credit is due, Mister Consul," she rallied. "I'm not stealing anybody's official thunder." The consul wagged a forefinger at her reprovingly. With impatience, the refugees waited to hear the news.

"Well, it's this way," Reynolds began. "I've got so tired having all you people sitting on my door-step I just had to make arrangements to ship you on the *Saxonia* in self-defense. *Saxonia's* due here from Naples Thursday—day after to-morrow; sails for New York at dawn Friday morning. Lady Crandall, here—and a better American never came out of the Middle West—

has agreed to go bond for your passage money; all your letters of credit and checks will be cashed by treasury agents before you leave the dock at New York, and you can settle with the steamship people right there.

"No, no; don't thank me! There's the person responsible for your getting home." The consul waved toward the governor's lady, who blushed rosily under the tumultuous blessings showered on her. Reynolds ducked out the door to save his face. The Shermans made their good nights, and with Kimball, started toward the stairs.

"Thursday night, before you sail," Lady Crandall called to them, "you all have an engagement—a regular American dinner with me at the Government House. Remember!"

"If you have hash—plain hash—and don't call it a rag-owt, we'll eat you out of house and home," Sherman shouted as addendum to the others' thanks.

"And you, my dear"—Lady Crandall beamed upon Jane—"you're coming right home with me to wait for the *Saxonia's* sailing. Oh, no, don't be too ready with your thanks. This is pure selfishness on my part. I want you to help plan my fall clothes. There, the secret's out. But with all those beautiful gowns, surely Hildebrand will not object if you leave the pattern of one of them in an out-of-the-way little place like this. Come on, now, I'll not take no for an answer. We'll pack up all these beauties and have you off in no time."

Lady Crandall beamed upon Jane.

Jane's thanks were ignored by the capable packer who smoothed and straightened the confections of silk and satin in the osier hampers. Lady Crandall summoned the porter to lift the precious freight to the back of her dogcart, waiting outside. Almer, perturbed at the kidnaping of his guest, came from behind the desk.

"You will go to your room now?" he queried anxiously.

"Not going to take it," Jane answered. "Have an invitation from Lady Crandall to visit the State House, or whatever you call it."

"But, pardon me. The room—it was rented, and I fear one night's lodging is due. Twenty shillings."

Jane elevated her eyebrows, but handed over a bill.

"Ah, no, lady. French paper—it is worthless to me. Only English gold, if the lady pleases." Almer's smile was leonine.

"But it's all I've got; just came from France, and——"

"Then, though it gives me the greatest sorrow, I must hold your luggage until you have the money changed. Excuse——"

Captain Woodhouse, who had dallied long over his dinner for lack of something else to do, came out of the dining-room just then, saw a woman in difficulties with the landlord, and instinctively stepped forward to offer his services.

"Beg pardon, but can I be of any help?"

Jane turned. The captain's heart gave a great leap and then went cold. Frank pleasure followed the first surprise in the girl's eyes.

"Why, Captain Woodhouse—how jolly!—To see you again after——"

She put out her hand with a free gesture of comradeship.

Captain Woodhouse did not see the girl's hand. He was looking into her eyes coldly, aloofly.

"I beg your pardon, but aren't you mistaken?"

"Mistaken?" The girl was staring at him, mystified.

"I'm afraid I have not had the pleasure of meeting you," he continued evenly. "But if I can be of service—now——"

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away from him.

"A small matter. I owe this man twenty shillings, and he will not accept French paper. It's all I have."

Woodhouse took the note from her.

"I'll take it gladly—perfectly good." He took some money from his pocket and looked at it. Then, to Almer: "I say, can you split a crown?"

"Change for you in a minute, sir—the tobacco shop down the street." Almer pocketed the gold piece and dodged out of the door.

Jane turned and found the deep-set gray eyes of Captain Woodhouse fixed upon her. They craved pardon—toleration of the incident just passed.

CHAPTER IX
ROOM D

Woodhouse hurried to Jane Gerson's side and began to speak swiftly and earnestly:

"You are from the States?"

A shrug was her answer. The girl's face was averted, and in the defiant set of her shoulders Woodhouse found little promise of pardon for the incident of the minute before. He persisted:

"This war means nothing to you—one side or the other?"

"I have equal pity for them both," she answered in a low voice.

"We are living in dangerous times," he continued earnestly. "I tell you frankly, were the fact that you and I had met before to become known here on the Rock the consequences would be most—inconvenient—for me." Jane turned and looked searchingly into his face. Something in the tone rather than the words roused her quick sympathy. Woodhouse kept on:

"I am sorry I had to deny that former meeting just now—that meeting which has been with me in such vivid memory. I regret that were you to allude to it again I would have to deny it still more emphatically."

"I'm sure I shan't mention it again," the girl broke in shortly.

"Perhaps since it means so little to you—your silence—perhaps you will do me that favor, Miss Gerson."

"Certainly." Woodhouse could see that anger still tinged her speech.

"May I go further—and ask you to—promise?" A shadow of annoyance creased her brow, but she nodded.

"That is very good of you," he thanked her. "Shall you be long on the Rock?"

"No longer than I have to. I'm sailing on the first boat for the States," she answered.

"Then I am in luck—to-night." Woodhouse tried to speak easily, though Jane Gerson's attitude was distant. "Meeting you again—that's luck."

"To judge by what you have just said it must be instead a great misfortune," she retorted, with a slow smile.

"That is not fair. You know what I mean. Don't imagine I've really forgotten our first meeting under happier conditions than these. I know I'm not clever—I can't make it sound as I would—but I've thought a great deal of you, Miss Gerson—wondering how you were making it in this great war. Perhaps——"

Almer returned at this juncture with the change, which he handed to Woodhouse. He was followed in by Lady Crandall, who assured Jane her hampers were securely strapped to the dog-cart. Jane attempted an introduction.

"This gentleman has just done me a service, Lady Crandall. May I present ____"

"So sorry. You don't know my name. My clumsiness. Captain Woodhouse." The man bridged the dangerous gap hurriedly. Lady Crandall acknowledged the introduction with a gracious smile.

"Your husband is Sir George——" he began.

"Yes, Sir George Crandall, Governor-general of the Rock. And you——"

"Quite a recent comer. Transferred from the Nile country here. Report to-morrow."

"All of the new officers have to report to the governor's wife as well," Lady Crandall rallied, with a glance at Jane. "You must come and see me—and Miss Gerson, who will be with me until her boat sails."

Woodhouse caught his breath. Jane Gerson, who knew him, at the governor's home! But he mastered himself in a second and bowed his thanks. Lady Crandall was moving toward the door. Her ward turned and held out a hand to Woodhouse.

"So good of you to have straightened out my finances," she said, with a smile in which the man hoped he read full forgiveness for his denial of a few minutes before. "If you're ever in America I hope——" He looked up quickly. "I hope somebody will be as nice to you. Good night."

Woodhouse and Almer were alone in the mongrel reception room. The hour was late. Almer began sliding folding wooden shutters across the back of the street windows. Woodhouse lingered over the excuse of a final cigarette, knowing the moment for his rapprochement with his fellow Wilhelmstrasse spy was at hand. He was more distraught than he cared to admit even to himself. The day's developments had been startling. First the stunning encounter with Capper there on the very Rock that was to be the scene of his delicate operations—Capper, whom he had thought sunk in the oblivion of some Alexandrian wine shop, but who had followed him on the *Princess Mary*. The fellow had deliberately cast himself into his notice, Woodhouse reflected; there had been menace and insolent hint of a power to harm in his sneering objurgation that Woodhouse should remember his name against a second meeting. "Capper—never heard the name in Alexandria, eh?" What could he mean by that if not that somehow the little ferret had learned of his visit to the home of Doctor Koch? And that meant—why, Capper in Gibraltar was as dangerous as a coiled cobra!

Then the unexpected meeting with Jane Gerson, the little American he had mourned as lost in the fury of the war. Ah, that was a joy not unmixed with regrets! What did she think of him? First, he had been forced coldly to deny the acquaintance that had meant much to him in moments of recollection; then, he had attempted a lame explanation, which explained nothing and must have left her more mystified than before. In fact, he had frankly thrown himself on the mercy of a girl on whom he had not the shadow of claim beyond the poor equity of a chance friendship—an incident she might consider as merely one of a day's travel as far as he could know. He had stood before her caught in a deceit, for on the occasion of that never-to-be-forgotten ride from Calais to Paris he had represented himself as hurrying back to Egypt, and here she found him still out of uniform and in a hotel in Gibraltar.

Beyond all this, Jane Gerson was going to the governor's house as a guest. She, whom he had forced, ever so cavalierly, into a promise to keep secret her half knowledge of the double game he was playing, was going to be on the intimate ground of association with the one man in Gibraltar who by a crook of his finger could end suspicion by a firing squad. This breezy little baggage from New York carried his life balanced on the rosy tip of her

tongue. She could be careless or she could be indifferent; in either case it would be bandaged eyes and the click of shells going home for him.

It was Almer who interrupted Woodhouse's troubled train of thought.

"Captain Woodhouse will report for signal duty on the Rock to-morrow, I suppose?" he insinuated, coming down to where Woodhouse was standing before the fireplace. He made a show of tidying up the scattered magazines and folders on the table.

"Report for signal duty?" the other echoed coldly. "How did you know I was to report for signal duty here?"

"In the press a few weeks ago," the hotel keeper hastily explained. "Your transfer from the Nile country was announced. We poor people here in Gibraltar, we have so little to think about, even such small details of news ____"

"Ah, yes. Quite so." Woodhouse tapped back a yawn.

"Your journey here from your station on the Nile—it was without incident?" Almer eyed his guest closely. The latter permitted his eyes to rest on Almer's for a minute before replying.

"Quite." Woodhouse threw his cigarette in the fireplace and started for the stairs.

"Ah, most unusual—such a long journey without incident of any kind in this time of universal war, with all Europe gone mad." Almer was twiddling the combination of a small safe set in the wall by the fireplace, and his chatter seemed only incidental to the absorbing work he had at hand. "How will the madness end, Captain Woodhouse? What will be the boundary lines of Europe's nations in—say, 1932?"

Almer rose as he said this and turned to look squarely into the other's face. Woodhouse met his gaze steadily and without betraying the slightest emotion.

"In 1932—I wonder," he mused, and into his speech unconsciously appeared that throaty intonation of the Teutonic tongue.

"Don't go yet, Captain Woodhouse. Before you retire I want you to sample some of this brandy." He brought out of the safe a short squat bottle and glasses. "See, I keep it in the safe, so precious it is. Drink with me, Captain, to the monarch you have come to Gibraltar to serve—to his majesty, King George the Fifth!"

Almer lifted his glass, but Woodhouse appeared wrapped in thought; his hand did not go up.

"I see you do not drink to that toast, Captain."

"No—I was thinking—of 1932."

"So?" Quick as a flash Almer caught him up. "Then perhaps I had better say, drink to the greatest monarch in Europe."

"To the greatest monarch in Europe!" Woodhouse lifted his glass and drained it.

Almer leaned suddenly across the table and spoke tensely: "You have—something maybe—I would like to see. Some little relic of Alexandria, let us say."

Woodhouse swept a quick glance around, then reached for the pin in his tie.

"A scarab; that's all."

In the space of a breath Almer had seen what lay in the back of the stone beetle. He gripped Woodhouse's hand fervently.

"Yes—yes, Nineteen Thirty-two! They have told me of your coming. A cablegram from Koch only this afternoon said you would be on the *Princess Mary*. The other—the real Woodhouse—there will be no slips; he will not ——"

"He is as good as a dead man for many months," Woodhouse interrupted. "Not a chance of a mistake." He slipped easily into German. "Everything depends on us now, Herr Almer."

"Perhaps the fate of our fatherland," Almer replied, cleaving to English. Woodhouse stepped suddenly away from the side of the table, against which he had been leaning, and his right hand jerked back to a concealed holster on his hip. His eyes were hot with suspicion.

"You do not answer in German; why not? Answer me in German or by ____"

"*Ach*! What need to become excited?" Almer drew back hastily, and his tongue speedily switched to German. "German is dangerous here on the Rock, Captain. Only yesterday they shot a man against a wall because he spoke German too well. Do you wonder I try to forget our native tongue?"

Woodhouse was mollified, and he smiled apologetically. Almer forgave him out of admiration for his discretion.

"No need to suspect me—Almer. They will tell you in Berlin how for twenty years I have served the Wilhelmstrasse. But never before such an opportunity—such an opportunity. Stupendous!" Woodhouse nodded enthusiastic affirmation. "But to business, Nineteen Thirty-two. This Captain Woodhouse some seven years ago was stationed here on the Rock for just three months."

"So I know."

"You, as Woodhouse, will be expected to have some knowledge of the signal tower, to which you will have access." Almer climbed a chair on the opposite side of the room, threw open the face of the old Dutch clock there, and removed from its interior a thin roll of blue drafting paper. He put it in Woodhouse's hands. "Here are a few plans of the interior of the signal tower—the best I could get. You will study them to-night; but give me your word to burn them before you sleep."

"Very good." Woodhouse slipped the roll into the breast pocket of his coat. Almer leaned forward in a gust of excitement, and, bringing his mouth

close to the other's ear, whispered hoarsely:

"England's Mediterranean fleet—twenty-two dreadnaughts, with cruisers and destroyers—nearly a half of Britain's navy, will be here any day, hurrying back to guard the Channel. They will anchor in the straits. Our big moment—it will be here then! Listen! Room D in the signal tower—that is the room. All the electric switches are there. From Room D every mine in the harbor can be exploded in ten seconds."

"Yes, but how to get to Room D?" Woodhouse queried.

"Simple. Two doors to Room D, Captain; an outer door like any other; an inner door of steel, protected by a combination lock like a vault's door. Two men on the Rock have that combination: Major Bishop, chief signal officer, he has in it his head; the governor-general of the Rock, he has it in his safe."

"We can get it out of the safe easier than from Major Bishop's head," Woodhouse put in, with a smile.

"Right. We have a friend—in the governor's own house—a man with a number from the Wilhelmstrasse like you and me. At any moment in the last two months he could have laid a hand on that combination. But we thought it better to wait until necessity came. When the fleet arrives you will have that combination; you will go with it to Room D, and after that——"

"The deluge," the other finished.

"Yes—yes! Our country master of the sea at last, and by the work of the Wilhelmstrasse—despised spies who are shot like dogs when they're caught, but die heroes' deaths." The hotel proprietor checked himself in the midst of his rhapsody, and came back to more practical details:

"But this afternoon—that man from Alexandria who called you by name. That looked bad—very bad. He knows something?"

Woodhouse, who had been expecting the question, and who preferred not to share an anxiety he felt himself best fitted to cope with alone, turned the other's question aside:

"Never met him before in my life to my best recollection. My name he picked up on the *Princess Mary*, of course; I won a pool one day, and he may have heard some one mention it. Simply a drunken brawler who didn't know what he was doing."

Almer seemed satisfied, but raised another point:

"But the girl who has just left here; am I to have no explanation of her?"

"What explanation do you want?" the captain demanded curtly.

"She recognized you. Who is she? What is she?"

"Devilish unfortunate," Woodhouse admitted. "We met a few weeks ago on a train, while I was on my way to Egypt, you know. Chatted together—oh, very informally. She is a capable young woman from the States—a 'buyer' she calls herself. But I don't think we need fear complications from that score; she's bent only on getting home."

"The situation is dangerous," urged Almer, wagging his head. "She is stopping at the governor's house; any reference she might make about meeting you on a train on the Continent when you were supposed to be at Wady Halfa on the Nile——"

"I have her promise she will not mention that meeting to anybody."

"*Ach*! A woman's promise!" Almer's eyes invoked Heaven to witness a futile thing. "She seemed rather glad to see you again; I——"

"Really?" Woodhouse's eyes lighted.

The Splendide's proprietor was pacing the floor as fast as his fat legs would let him. "Something must be done," he muttered again and again. He halted abruptly before Woodhouse, and launched a thick forefinger at him like a torpedo.

"You must make love to that girl, Woodhouse, to keep her on our side," was his ultimatum.

Woodhouse regarded him quizzically, leaned forward, and whispered significantly.

"I'm already doing it," he said.

CHAPTER X
A VISIT TO A LADY

Turning to consider the never-stale fortunes of one of fate's bean bags ——

Mr. Billy Capper, ejected from the Hotel Splendide, took little umbrage at such treatment; it was not an uncommon experience, and, besides, a quiet triumph that would not be dampened by trifles filled his soul. Cheerfully he pushed through the motley crowd on Waterport Street down to the lower levels of the city by the Line Wall, where the roosts of sailors and warrens of quondam adventurers off all the seven seas made far more congenial atmosphere than that of the Splendide's hollow pretense. He chose a hostelry more commensurate with his slender purse than Almer's, though as a matter of fact the question of paying a hotel bill was furthest from Billy Capper's thoughts; such formal transactions he avoided whenever feasible. The proprietor of the San Roc, where Capper took a room, had such an evil eye that his new guest made a mental note that perhaps he might have to leave his bag behind when he decamped. Capper abhorred violence—to his own person.

Alone over a glass of thin wine—the champagne days, alas! had been too fleeting—Capper took stock of his situation and conned the developments he hoped to be the instrument for starting. To begin with, finances were wretchedly bad, and that was a circumstance so near the ordinary for Capper that he shuddered as he pulled a gold guinea and a few silver bits from his pocket, and mechanically counted them over. Of the three hundred marks Louisa—pretty snake!—had given him in the Café Riche and the expense

money he had received from her the following day to cover his expedition to Alexandria for the Wilhelmstrasse naught but this paltry residue! That second-cabin ticket on the *Princess Mary* had taken the last big bite from his hoard, and here he was in this black-and-tan town with a quid and little more between himself and the old starved-dog life.

But—and Capper narrowed his eyes and sagely wagged his head—there'd be something fat coming. When he got knee to knee with the governor-general of the Rock, and told him what he, Billy Capper, knew about the identity of Captain Woodhouse, newly transferred to the signal service at Gibraltar, why, if there wasn't a cool fifty pounds or a matter of that as honorarium from a generous government Billy Capper had missed his guess; that's all.

"I say, Governor, of course this is very handsome of you, but I didn't come to tell what I know for gold. I'm a loyal Englishman, and I've done what I have for the good of the old flag."

"Quite right, Mr. Capper; quite right. But you will please accept this little gift as an inadequate recognition of your loyalty. Your name shall be mentioned in my despatches home."

Capper rehearsed this hypothetical dialogue with relish. He could even catch the involuntary gasp of astonishment from the governor when that responsible officer in his majesty's service heard the words Capper would whisper to him; could see the commander of the Rock open a drawer in his desk and take therefrom a thick white sheaf of bank-notes—count them! Then—ah, then—the first train for Paris and the delights of Paris at war-time prices.

The little spy anticipated no difficulty in gaining audience with the governor. Before he had been fifteen minutes off the *Princess Mary* he had heard the name of the present incumbent of Government House. Crandall—Sir George Crandall; the same who had been in command of the forts at Rangoon back in '99. Oh, yes, Capper knew him, and he made no doubt that, if properly reminded of a certain bit of work Billy Capper had done back in the Burmese city, Sir George would recall him—and with every reason for gratefulness. To-morrow—yes, before ever Sir George had had his morning's

peg, Capper would present himself at Government House and tell about that house on Queen's Terrace at Ramleh; about the unconscious British officer who was carried there and hurried thence by night, and the tall well-knit man in conference with Doctor Koch who was now come to be a part of the garrison of the Rock under the stolen name of Woodhouse.

Capper had his dinner, then strolled around the town to see the sights and hear what he could hear. Listening was a passion with him.

For the color and the exotic savor of Gibraltar on a hot August night Capper had no eye. The knife edge of a moon slicing the battlements of the old Moorish Castle up on the heights; the minor tinkle of a guitar sounding from a vine-curtained balcony; a Riffian muleteer's singsong review of his fractious beast's degraded ancestry—not for these incidentals did the practical mind under the battered Capper bowler have room. Rather the scraps of information and gossip passed from one blue-coated artilleryman off duty, to another over a mug of ale, or the confidence of a sloe-eyed dancer to the guitar player in a tavern; this was meat for Capper. Carefully he husbanded his gold piece, and judiciously he spent his silver for drink. He enjoyed himself in the ascetic spirit of a monk in a fast, believing that the morrow would bring champagne in place of the thin wine his pitiful silver could command.

Then, of a sudden, he caught a glimpse of Louisa—Louisa of the Wilhelmstrasse. Capper's heart skipped, and an involuntary impulse crooked his fingers into claws.

The girl was just coming out of a café—the only café aspiring to Parisian smartness Gibraltar boasts. Her head was bare. Under an arm she had tucked a stack of cigar boxes. Had it not been that a steady light from an overhead arc cut her features out of the soft shadow with the fineness of a diamond-pointed tool, Capper would have sworn his eyes were playing him tricks. But Louisa's features were unmistakable, whether in the Lucullian surroundings of a Berlin summer garden or here on a street in Gibraltar. Capper had instinctively crushed himself against the nearest wall on seeing the girl; the crowd had come between himself and her, and she had not seen him.

All the weasel instinct of the man came instantly to the fore that second of recognition, and the glint in his eyes and baring of his teeth were flashed from brute instinct—the instinct of the night-prowling meat hunter. All the vicious hate which the soul of Billy Capper could distil flooded to his eyes and made them venomous. Slinking, dodging, covering, he followed the girl with the cigar boxes. She entered several dance-halls, offered her wares at the door of a cheap hotel. For more than an hour Capper shadowed her through the twisting streets of the old Spanish town. Finally she turned into a narrow lane, climbed flagstone steps, set the width of the lane, to a house under the scarp of a cliff, and let herself in at the street door. Capper, following to the door as quickly as he dared, found it locked.

The little spy was choking with a lust to kill; his whole body trembled under the pulse of a murderous passion. He had found Louisa—the girl who had sold him out—and for her private ends, Capper made no doubt of that. Some day he had hoped to run her down, and with his fingers about her soft throat to tell her how dangerous it was to trick Billy Capper. But to have her flung across his path this way when anger was still at white heat in him—this was luck! He'd see this Louisa and have a little powwow with her even if he had to break his way into the house.

Capper felt the doorknob again; the door wouldn't yield. He drew back a bit and looked up at the front of the house. Just a dingy black wall with three unlighted windows set in it irregularly. The roof projected over the gabled attic like the visor of a cap. Beyond the farther corner of the house were ten feet of garden space, and then the bold rock of the cliff springing upward. A low wall bounded the garden; over its top nodded the pale ghosts of moonflowers and oleanders.

Capper was over the wall in a bound, and crouching amid flower clusters, listening for possible alarm. None came, and he became bolder. Skirting a tiny arbor, he skulked to a position in the rear of the house; there a broad patch of illumination stretched across the garden, coming from two French windows on the lower floor. They stood half open; through the thin white stuff hanging behind them Capper could see vaguely the figure of a girl seated before a dressing mirror with her hands busy over two heavy ropes of hair. Nothing to do but step up on the little half balcony outside the

windows, push through into the room, and—have a little powwow with Louisa.

An unwonted boldness had a grip on the little spy. Never a person to force a face-to-face issue when the trick could be turned behind somebody's back, he was, nevertheless, driven irresistibly by a furious anger that took no heed of consequences.

With the light foot of a cat, Capper straddled the low rail of the balcony, pushed back one of the partly opened windows, and stepped into Louisa's room. His eyes registered mechanically the details—a heavy canopied bed, a massive highboy of some dark wood, chairs supporting carelessly flung bits of wearing apparel. But he noted especially that just as he emerged from behind one of the loose curtains a white arm remained poised over a brown head.

"Stop where you are, Billy Capper!" The girl's low-spoken order was as cold and tense as drawn wire. No trace of shock or surprise was in her voice. She did not turn her head. Capper was brought up short, as if he felt a noose about his neck.

Slowly the figure seated before the dressing mirror turned to face him. Tumbling hair framed the girl's face, partly veiling the yellow-brown eyes, which seemed two spots of metal coming to incandescence under heat. Her hands, one still holding a comb, lay supinely in her lap.

"I admit this is a surprise, Capper," Louisa said, letting each word fall sharply, but without emphasis. "However, it is like you to be—unconventional. May I ask what you want this time—besides money, of course?"

Capper wet his lips and smiled wryly. He had jumped so swiftly to impulse that he had not prepared himself beforehand against the moment when he should be face to face with the girl from the Wilhelmstrasse. Moreover, he had expected to be closer to her—very close indeed—before the time for words should come.

"I—I saw you to-night and followed you—here," he began lamely.

"Flattering!" She laughed shortly.

"Oh, you needn't try to come it over me with words!" Capper's teeth showed in a nasty grin as his rage flared back from the first suppression of surprise. "I've come here to have a settlement for a little affair between you and me."

"Blackmail? Why, Billy Capper, how true to form you run!" The yellow-brown eyes were alight and burning now. "Have you determined the sum you want or are you in the open market?"

Capper grinned again, and shifted his weight, inadvertently advancing one foot a little nearer the seated girl as he did so.

"Pretty quick with the tongue—as always," he sneered. "But this time it doesn't go, Louisa. You pay differently this time—pay for selling me out. Understand!" Again one foot shifted forward a few inches by the accident of some slight body movement on the man's part. Louisa still sat before her dressing mirror, hands carelessly crossed on her lap.

"Selling you out?" she repeated evenly. "Oh! So you finally did discover that you were elected to be the goat? Brilliant Capper! How long before you made up your mind you had a grievance?"

The girl's cool admission goaded the little man's fury to frenzy. His mind craved for action—for the leap and the tightening of fingers around that taunting throat; but somehow his body, strangely detached from the fiat of volition as if it were another's body, lagged to the command. Violence had never been its mission; muscles were slow to accept this new conception of the mind. But the man's feet followed their crafty intelligence; by fractions of inches they moved forward stealthily.

"You wouldn't be here now," Louisa coldly went on, "if you weren't fortune's bright-eyed boy. You were slated to be taken off the boat at Malta and shot; the boat didn't stop at Malta through no fault of ours, and so you arrived at Alexandria—and became a nuisance." One of the girl's hands lifted from her lap and lazily played along the edge of the rosewood standard which supported the mirror on the dressing table. It stopped at a curiously

carved rosette in the rococo scroll-work. Capper's suspicious eye noted the movement. He sparred for time—the time needed by those stealthy feet to shorten the distance between themselves and the girl.

"Why," he hissed, "why did you give me a number with the Wilhelmstrasse and send me to Alexandria if I was to be caught and shot at Malta? That's what I'm here to find out."

"Excellent Capper!" Her fingers were playing with the convolutions of the carved rosette. "Intelligent Capper! He comes to a lady's room at night to find the answer to a simple question. He shall have it. He evidently does not know the method of the Wilhelmstrasse, which is to choose two men for every task to be accomplished. One—the 'target,' we call him—goes first; our friends whose secrets we seek are allowed to become suspicious of him—we even give them a hint to help them in their suspicion. They seize the 'target,' and in time of war he becomes a real target for a firing squad, as you should have been, Capper, at Malta. Then when our friends believe they have nipped our move in the bud follows the second man—who turns the trick."

Capper was still wrestling with that baffling stubbornness of the body. Each word the girl uttered was like vitriol on his writhing soul. His mind willed murder—willed it with all the strength of hate; but still the springs of his body were cramped—by what? Not cowardice, for he was beyond reckoning results. Certainly not compassion or any saving virtue of chivalry. Why did his eyes constantly stray to that white hand lifted to allow the fingers to play with the filigree of wood on the mirror support?

"Then you engineered the stealing of my number—from the hollow under the handle of my cane—some time between Paris and Alexandria?" he challenged in a whisper, his face thrust forward between hunched shoulders.

"No, indeed. It was necessary for you to have—the evidence of your profession when the English searched you at Malta. But the loss of your number is not news; Koch, in Alexandria, has reported, of course."

The girl saw Capper's foot steal forward again. He was not six feet from her now. His wiry body settled itself ever so slightly for a spring. Louisa rose

from her chair, one hand still resting on the wooden rosette of the mirror standard. She began to speak in a voice drained of all emotion:

"You followed me here to-night, Billy Capper, imagining in your poor little soul that you were going to do something desperate—something really human and brutal. You came in my window all primed for murder. But your poor little soul all went to water the instant we faced each other. You couldn't nerve yourself to leap upon a woman even. You can't now."

She smiled on him—a woman's flaying smile of pity. Capper writhed, and his features twisted themselves in a paroxysm of hate.

"I have my finger on a bell button here, Capper. If I press it men will come in here and kill you without asking a question. Now you'd better go."

Capper's eyes jumped to focus on a round white nib under one of the girl's fingers there on the mirror's standard. The little ivory button was alive—a sentient thing suddenly allied against him. That inanimate object rather than Louisa's words sent fingers of cold fear to grip his heart. A little ivory button waiting there to trap him! He tried to cover his vanished resolution with bluster, sputtering out in a tense whisper:

"You're a devil—a devil from hell, Louisa! But I'll get you. They shoot women in war time! Sir George Crandall—I know him—I did a little service for him once in Rangoon. He'll hear of you and your Wilhelmstrasse tricks, and you'll have your pretty back against a wall with guns at your heart before to-morrow night. Remember—before to-morrow night!"

Capper was backing toward the open window behind him. The girl still stood by the mirror, her hand lightly resting where the ivory nib was. She laughed.

"Very well, Billy Capper. It will be a firing party for two—you and me together. I'll make a frank confession—tell all the information Billy Capper sold to me for three hundred marks one night in the Café Riche—the story of the Anglo-Belgian defense arrangements. The same Billy Capper, I'll say, who sold the Lord Fisher letters to the kaiser—a cable to Downing Street will confirm that identification inside of two hours. And then——"

"And your Captain Woodhouse—your cute little Wilhelmstrasse captain," Capper flung back from the window, pretending not to heed the girl's potent threat; "I know all about him, and the governor'll know, too—same time he hears about you!"

"Good night, Billy Capper," Louisa answered, with a piquant smile. "And au revoir until we meet with our backs against that wall."

Capper's head dropped from view over the balcony edge; there was a sound of running feet amid the close-ranked plants in the garden, then silence.

The girl from the Wilhelmstrasse, alone in the house save for the bent old housekeeper asleep in her attic, turned and laid her head—a bit weakly—against the carved standard, where in a florid rosette showed the ivory tip of the hinge for the cheval glass.

CHAPTER XI
A SPY IN THE SIGNAL TOWER

Government House, one of the Baedeker points of Gibraltar, stands amid its gardens on a shelf of the Rock about mid-way between the Alameda and the signal tower, perched on the very spine of the lion's back above it. Its windows look out on the blue bay and over to the red roofs of Algeciras across the water on Spanish territory. Tourists gather to peek from a respectful distance at the mossy front and quaint ecclesiastic gables of Government House, which has a distinction quite apart from its use as the home of the governor-general. Once, back in the dim ages of Spain's glory, it was a monastery, one of the oldest in the southern tip of the peninsula. When the English came their practical sense took no heed of the protesting ghosts of the monks, but converted the monastery into a home for the military head of the fortress—a little dreary, a shade more melancholy than the accustomed manor hall at home, but adequate and livable.

Welcome to our website – the perfect destination for book lovers and knowledge seekers. We believe that every book holds a new world, offering opportunities for learning, discovery, and personal growth. That’s why we are dedicated to bringing you a diverse collection of books, ranging from classic literature and specialized publications to self-development guides and children's books.

More than just a book-buying platform, we strive to be a bridge connecting you with timeless cultural and intellectual values. With an elegant, user-friendly interface and a smart search system, you can quickly find the books that best suit your interests. Additionally, our special promotions and home delivery services help you save time and fully enjoy the joy of reading.

Join us on a journey of knowledge exploration, passion nurturing, and personal growth every day!

ebookmasss.com